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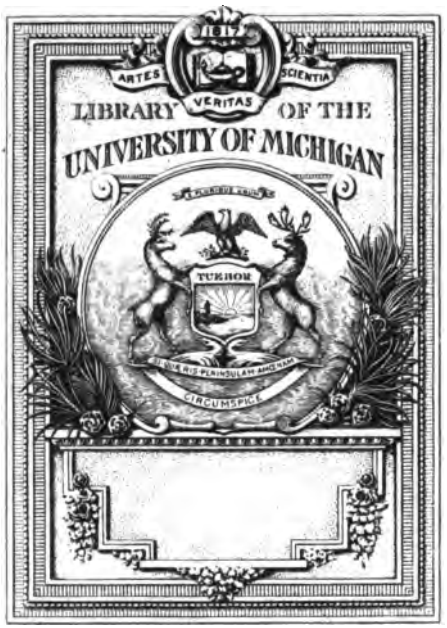
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MARIETTA.

A Novel.

BY

T. ADOLPHUS TROLLOPE,

AUTHOR OF

"LA BEATA," "FILIPPO STROZZI," "A DECADE OF ITALIAN WOMEN," ETC

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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MARIETTA.

CHAPTER I.

HER FATHER AND HIS FATHER.

CARLO PALLI, the Fattore, who had the management of the estates still nominally belonging to the Marchese Parini in the Casentino, and his son were grumbling a little at the cold when we first made their acquaintance at sunrise on a May morning, travelling in the Fattore's smart little *bagavino* drawn by his fast-trotting Maremma pony from their home amid the chestnut-trees in the upper basin of the Tuscan river, to the capital amid the olive-groves in the Valdarno. But if the rawness of the spring morning had then pinched and purpled the broad-faced farmer's jolly red nose, painted by the pure juice of many a big-bellied flask from the Casentino vineyards, the journey over that bleak range of mountain which separates the upper from the lower valley, was a much severer bout towards the end of October, at the same hour of the day. Arno, being in no hurry, makes a circuit of a hundred miles or so, for the sake of keeping in the

sheltered lowlands, wanders away leisurely through pleasant places under the walls of sunny Bibbiena, within sight of smiling white Arezzo, and knows nothing of the very different climate of the highlands it encircles. But men, even in Tuscany, having less time on their hands than shining rivers, cannot afford to follow the pleasant travelling habit of the Arno, even to avoid rough winds and wintry weather. In truth, crossing the Consuma in an open gig before sunrise, towards the end of October, is no joke; and would very considerably modify the ideas of many a stranger in Italy who had pictured to himself that land of promise as a clime of perpetual summer, and who might have a few hours previously left olive-circled Florence basking in its mellow autumnal sunshine.

The stout Fattore and his son, however, knew right well what they were going to face, when they started from their comparatively snug homestead in the valley beneath Poppi—though the climate there is a very different one from that of the lower Valdarno—and they muffled and wrapped and great-coated accordingly. Nevertheless, they were right glad to find themselves in the shelter of the little inn on the top of the pass, with the worst part of their journey done, a roaring fire of Casentino oak-roots in the wide hearth, and the materials for a solid breakfast before them.

They were going up to Florence, on a very similar errand to that on which they were bound in the previous spring. Love and money, the two great motive powers;—or rather, as it should be put on the principle of "seniores priores," money and love,—these as before were the objects of the journey.

The old man as usual was in pursuit of the former, and the young one as usual in pursuit of the latter; and as usual their views on the combined subjects did not altogether agree.

Matters had moved on a little in respect to both these two great departments of human affairs, as they affected the travellers, since they last journeyed that road together. The Fattore felt quite sure that his *illustrissimo padrone*, the Marchese, was not likely to lessen the speed of his down-hill progress as he got nearer the bottom; and he was for sundry reasons desirous of being in at the death. It was a long time since he had heard from his brother; and as he had a much higher opinion of his town-bred brother's business talent and shrewdness, than he had of his perfect loyalty and uprightness, he had begun to be a little anxious about the state of matters. Therefore he had determined to go and see for himself how all stood.

Of the position of Nanni's affairs, with regard to that other junior department of the business of life, the reader knows somewhat more than his father did. Nanni, like a wise general, had considered that the defence is always a more advantageous position for the weaker party than the attack. On returning home, therefore, to the Casentino from his last visit to Florence, after the party at his uncle's villa and his memorable conversation with his cousin Laura, he had said no word to his father of the conspiracy against paternal authority then hatched. When the Fattore and his son had talked over the matter at their breakfast table at that same inn on the occasion of their former journey, Nanni had felt indeed little inclination for the task assigned

to him of wooing his town-bred cousin, and was impressed by a strong conviction that his efforts in that direction would be fruitless. But he recognised the expediency of such a marriage, if it could be achieved, and was fully purposed to attempt the enterprise. All this was now changed. But his father conceived the position of matters to remain the same.

In thus waiting till the moment for open resistance to his father should be no longer avoidable, Nanni, it must be admitted, had scarcely been so loyally true to the terms of the convention between them, as Laura had. For whenever any conversation on the subject had chanced to occur between his father and himself, he had spoken much of his persuasion that Laura would not "look at him," as he phrased it; and although he did not scruple to let his father understand that he was not eagerly bent on the match, yet he did not, as Laura had done, openly declare, that he would make no such marriage, and honestly base his refusal on his own disinclination for it.

This was what he ought to have done; but did not do, for lack of courage. For women are ordinarily braver than men in the face of any danger equally estimated by both of them; and the notion that the reverse is the fact, is mainly propagated by its being customary for men to represent themselves as more courageous, and for women to protest themselves more cowardly than they really are.

"I say, Nanni, my boy, go into the wood-house and bring an armful of logs thyself. The old woman is as stingy of her fire as the folks are in Florence. But, *per Bacco*, one needs a blaze here, and a jolly

good one too. I never," he continued, as Nanni came back loaded with logs, and heaped them on the fire, "was so nearly frozen in my life. What a blessed bit of country this Prato Magno is, to be sure!"

"Ah! but were it not for the Prato Magno," returned Nanni, "we should be sweltering up in the Casentino in summer, as they are in Florence."

"You've always a word to say for the Casentino, Nanni, let it be how it will."

"Yes, I love the chestnut woods, and the *macchie*,* and the green fields. I should be sorry to live in Florence, I should!"

"Well, I like the country best myself; but what will Laura say to that, eh, my son?" returned his father, seizing an opportunity to turn the conversation to the matters that were uppermost in his mind.

"Well! I don't think Laura will have much to say to the matter, father, one way or the other. I have told you over and over again that that cock won't fight;—but you won't believe me."

"No! I don't believe a word of it! Or, if it won't, I believe it is all your own fault. I know what girls are;—or did know in my time. And I suppose the breed of them isn't much altered. But you are too much of a gaby, you are, Nanni, my son; and you don't stand up to her."

"Mayhap you'd get tired, Babbo, yourself of standing up, as you call it, if so be you were bowled over every time you did stand up."

* *Macchie*, literally "stains." The word is commonly and very picturesquely used to signify woods in Tuscany; the phrase being suggested by the dark patch-like appearance made by a wood, when seen amid a wide expanse of sunny open country from an eminence.

"Don't tell me!—a parcel of rubbish. Besides, when all is said and done, the girl must do as her father would have her. And Giuseppe's mind is quite one with mine on the subject. You may be quite sure that a parcel of girl's nonsense won't stand between my brother and his will."

"Ah! I tell you what it is though, Babbo," said Nanni, thus pushed to his retrenchments; "I am not the man to marry a girl that's forced on him that way. I can find plenty who wouldn't need to be forced by their fathers, nor by their mothers neither, if that's all! So if my city uncle Giuseppe thinks he is going to choose a lad for his lass, to please nobody but himself, he may look to somebody else than Nanni Palli. And if I know aught of the stuff you are made of, Babbo, I don't think you would have taken a wife on such terms."

There were one or two points in this speech specially calculated to produce the effect which Nanni would have desired, if he had thought of any result at all. In the first place, it appealed to a sort of rough sense of independence, and countryman's jealousy of being dictated to and managed for by townfolk;—a very prominent feeling among the country population of Tuscany. In the next place, it seemed to imply a kind of pretension on the part of Giuseppe Palli to override and settle the affairs of his country brother and his family. And this was a point on which Carlo, the younger brother, was very sensitive. Although the plan of the marriage in question had been his own quite as much as it had been his brother's, yet no sooner was the idea of its being carried into effect by the will and authority of his brother, overriding his own side of

the house, as it were, suggested to him, than a certain degree of inceptive resistance was called into action in his mind. So he answered his son, with his mouth very full of broiled ham and bread the while.

"As for that, Nanni Palli, I do not tell thee to take a wife at thy uncle's bidding, not I! He is over fond of bidding other folk. Giuseppe Palli thinks his shop the middle one of the Ponte Vecchio, and the Ponte Vecchio the centre of the world! But we don't want him to play the *maestro di casa* * for us, down in the Casentino. Not but," continued the farmer, after swallowing a long draught of wine,—"not but what you are a gaby, my son Nanni, for not knowing how to bring your pretty cousin to her bearings."

"Well, but, father, suppose the fact were, that I did not like Laura, in the way of making her my wife that is, a bit better than she likes me."

"Then, my son, thou art doubly an ass!—first for not falling in love with as pretty a girl as is in Florence, and next for not understanding on which side thy bread is buttered."

"Laura *is* a pretty lass; and I am sure I would be the last to say nay to that. But may be there are others that need not fear to stand along side of her for all that. And I'll tell you where it is, *Padre mio*," continued Nanni, boldly, after a pause, during which his mind was earnestly engaged in meditating on the philosophy of the matter; "a fellow is deucedly

* "House steward." As such a functionary is very apt to get the entire management of a family into his hands, *fare il maestro di casa* is a very common expression to signify ruling all a person's affairs for them.

apt to think them prettiest that give most signs of thinking him worth being pretty for."

"Oho! that is the stone the cat lies under, is it!" said the senior, shutting one eye, and fixing the other upon his son's face, with a gaze that was meant to be profoundly penetrating. He proceeded before speaking further, to ruminate leisurely over a huge mouthful of bread and ham, and then, after taking a long pull at his glass, he continued: "Well, Nanni, my son, this is where it is, look you. One man may lead a horse to water, but twenty can't make him drink, as you may have heard me say before. And it's true of a horse, let alone a mule; and you, my son, though you are not a bad boy in the main, to give the devil and the priest their dues, are about six times more headstrong than any mule I ever saw. *Altro che mulo!* a mule is a sensible beast in its way, and chooses its path with judgment."

"Well, father, as far as that goes . . . ."

"Let me finish what I have got to say, Nanni. I can't go on any faster, for this loaf is crusty, and not convenient for talking. I was going to observe that you will inherit a tidy lot of acres and a bit of money to work them with from your father; and if you don't inherit any of his sense, it isn't my fault; and we must give God thanks for all things. May be when a man is born with his bread, and his butter too, ready earned for him, it is more in the nature of things and more fitting that he should be a gaby. No doubt it is gentlemanlike; and you will have enough to be 'gentleman.'"

"Well! but, I say, father, if you come to that . . "

"But I haven't come to it yet. Let me say out my say. Stand up, Nanni!"

Nanni obeyed, wondering what was to come next, and rather suspecting that his father was going to sentence him in form to marry his cousin, with all the ceremony of a criminal court.

"Six foot two, if you're an inch!" his father proceeded, eyeing him critically and complacently; "broad in the shoulder, fine in the loins! as well grown a fellow as there is this day in the Casentino! And should not I deserve to have the blight on every acre of the land, if I was to fly in the face of Providence and grumble because thou art a fool! Sit down, Nanni, my son, and finish thy breakfast."

"But is it certain, father," said Nanni, argumentatively, as he obeyed his father's last behest; "is it quite certain that a man *is* a fool for marrying a girl he likes, and letting alone another that he don't like, at least not in that way?"

"If he was not a fool, his liking and his interest would not travel different roads; that is my notion," replied his father. "But this is the upshot of it, Nanni. Thou wilt have the best half of the acres at home there, whether thou marriest thy cousin Laura, or no. I have shown thee how to put the other half to them, and help thyself to such a wife as most men would jump at into the bargain. I have shown thee the water; if thou wilt not drink it, I know very well that I cannot make thee, and I am not going to trouble my rest or spoil my digestion over it. Any way, I shan't be sorry to let my brother see that we can do without him, and that all the world can't be ruled exactly to please him. Nevertheless," he added, after a pause, "I have a kindness for Laura; I like the girl, and should have been well pleased to have her for a daughter-in-law. And any way,

Nanny, before thou goest to do a fool's trick, bide a while and think it over. May be some glimmer of sense may come to thee!"

Nanni did finish his breakfast with great appetite and a light heart, in no wise cast down by his father's estimate of his capacity, but exceedingly delighted to find that he was likely to have his own way in the matter of marriage far more easily than he had dared to hope. Different causes contributed to bring about the result. Though it did certainly seem to his father a very great pity that the different parts of the Perini property should not continue to be united, his heart was not so strongly set on the building up of a great Palli family, as that of his more ambitious and less Epicurean brother. Then, as has been hinted, he enjoyed the idea of playing for once the great man to his brother, compelling him to sue, and finally throwing him over. But lastly,—and this was, perhaps, the strongest reason of all,—he was perfectly determined, as he said, not to suffer himself to be vexed about the matter; not to suffer it to spoil the enjoyment of one day's dinner, or one night's rest, or one hour's pleasant equanimity.

And such philosophical and calculating care for a man's tranquillity of mind and placidity of temper is peculiarly characteristic of Tuscan habits and ideas. A certain Epicurean philosophy is very common among all classes of the people. And they habitually look on mental disquietude, anxiety, and care as certain and positive evils to be avoided as sedulously as our less sensitively shrinking people do the more palpable and material ills of life. And the real fact is that all the passions of the mind make their effects felt so directly, so immediately, and so certainly on

the bodies of this nervously organised and excitable race, that they dread the result of them in a manner quite surprising to the more robustly constituted idiosyncrasies of the north. It is by no means an uncommon thing to hear a stout healthy man in any rank of Tuscan life protesting that he must physic himself to remedy or to avoid the ravages of any one of the more common mental emotions, a fit of anger, or a spell of anxiety. They absolutely do so physic themselves, and absolutely need it. The familiarity of the people with the phenomena of the agency of mind on matter is shown by many a phrase in their common speech. *Mi fece fare cattivo sangue*, is an ordinary mode of expression, meaning simply, "he made me angry."

Thus Fattore Carlo Palli was neither further sighted in his tender care for his own equanimity, nor wiser in his Epicureanism than the rest of the world around him, when he determined that he would not allow his mind to be tormented by what he could not help considering as his son's folly.

So the breakfast at the Consuma was finished without any further unpleasant conversation; and the father and son again took their places in the *bagavino* to perform the remainder of their journey. As upon the former occasion, they slept at the house of Carlo Palli's friend, the priest at Pelago; and got into Florence early the next morning. As before also, Nanni and his father separated after their breakfast at the Pappagallo; Nanni to follow his own devices, for his father, true to his resolution, said not a word to him about Laura; and the Fattore to seek an interview with his brother on the Ponte Vecchio.

"It is a long time, brother, since I have heard

from you," began the Fattore, when the contrasted pair of brothers were closeted in the little den behind the shop, and had exchanged their brief and not very expansive greetings; "and I thought that I would take a run up and see how matters are going on."

"Well, brother Carlo, there can be nothing I think to make any change in the position of your interests. The mortgage bonds stand as they did of course. It might perhaps be worth your while to see if you could come to some arrangement with the Marchese, by which the open sale of the estates might be avoided. It might be better for both parties, ... better for both parties, you know."

"Yes! that might be a good move; though I fancy it would be difficult to make a sale at a short notice over my head. But I was thinking about the palace, brother. What are we to do about the mortgage on the old house? It would be much more likely that a purchaser might come forward to make a bid for that."

Now, had it not been for the conversation between Laura and her father, which has been detailed in a former chapter, from which the jeweller had gathered that it would in all probability be necessary for him to give up all hope of the projected alliance between his daughter and her cousin, the "we" in the Fattore's speech would have been all very well. Supposing that marriage to have been a matter of course, as both parties had imagined it to be when last they spoke together, Giuseppe Palli would have been quite willing that the mortgage on the palace should be a joint affair, as Carlo had understood it to be. But if no such marriage was to take place, the jeweller's

views were altogether changed. In that case he had no idea of dividing so desirable an acquisition with his brother, and had long since determined that the arrangement he had come to with the Marchese should be on his own sole account. So he said, in reply to his brother's last remark:

"It is very kind of you, brother Carlo, I am sure, to be so alive to my interests. But to tell you the truth, I do not think that I am apt to need anybody's assistance in looking after them. I have already taken with regard to the palace the steps which I was recommending you to think of respecting the land."

"The deuce you have! Trust you for never letting a chance slip! But I wonder you did not write to me a word about it. I make no doubt that you were quite right, brother; but one likes to have a word in the management of one's own concerns, you know. I should have liked to hear the terms you gave him, and the time."

"But what I have done regards the palace alone."

"So I hear you say, brother; but I should have liked to have been consulted all the same."

"Consulted!" said the elder brother, with a shrug of his shoulders, and a quiet complacent little laugh; "Why, I confess, my good Carlo, that notwithstanding the very high opinion which, as you are perfectly aware, I have always had of your high capacity and business talents, it has never entered into my head to seek the advantage of supplying the deficiencies of my own judgment by having recourse to yours. Ha! ha! ha!"

"It is always your way, Giuseppe, to make so many roundabout phrases, that a plain man like me

loses his way in them. Perhaps that's what they are meant for. But I say, I ought to have known the terms made with the Marchese. If I find half the cash, I suppose I have a right to have a word in the spending of it!"

"You find half the cash! Why, what are you dreaming about, brother Carlo? Did I ask you to find any cash?"

"But if the affair is between us . . . . ."

"Between us! my dear brother. The Palazzo Lunardi is mortgaged to me. *I* advanced a sum of money on it. *I* have deemed it advisable to let the owner of the property have a further sum on making it over to me, conditionally only on the repayment of the capital so advanced with interest—with all arrears of accruing interest—by a certain day. This is all clear and plain, I hope!"

All the burly farmer's philosophy would not save him here from making, as he would have phrased it, a very great deal of bad blood. He would have given something to have avoided the fit of anger, which he could not control, and which he knew would entail a physicking, if nothing worse. The blood rushed into his face and neck, as he said,

"You don't mean, Giuseppe, that you have taken advantage of the confidence I had in you to keep this affair to yourself, and shut me out of it? Was it not all settled here between us?"

"My impression undoubtedly was, brother, that this mortgage on the palace was to be my affair; and I have acted under that impression. But, after all, what will it signify in the end, my dear brother? If your boy marries my girl, will it not come to the same thing in the end?"

Notwithstanding his anger, the Fattore was still sufficiently prudent to feel a difficulty in replying to this. He would have liked to tell his brother, that he and his daughter might go to—shall we say a stage beyond purgatory?—together! that his son could do better than marry the daughter of a *strozzino*,* though unhappily she was his own cousin! &c., &c.

But notwithstanding what had passed between him and his son on the subject the day before, the farmer was unwilling to throw up all chances of the family marriage, which had so much to recommend it. He remembered all that Nanni had said about Laura's rejection of his addresses, and felt convinced that his brother's determination to get the palace into his own hands was the result of much such a talk between his brother and his niece as had passed between him and his son; and his rage was no little increased by the reflection. He felt sure that his brother's last words were dictated by the most cynical hypocrisy. And his disgust at it made him anxious to meet it with equal hypocrisy, if it were in his power to do so! But he was much at a loss how to reply to his brother's plausible words.

"That is all very well, brother Giuseppe!" he said, doggedly. "But since it is all the same thing, why not share the affair between us? What is the good of playing a dirty trick for nothing?"

"Fie! fie! brother Carlo! I must not let you use such phrases as that. I never play dirty tricks at all, and therefore cannot say that I certainly do not play them for nothing. But you are losing sight of

* Literally a "throttler," from *strozzare* "to throttle. The word is used to signify an usurer.

what I said. I remarked that it would all come to the same thing *if* your boy married my girl. But, you see, I prefer, that if that should not turn out to be the case, Palazzo Lunardi should become the property of Laura and not of Nanni Palli. A prudent man, brother Carlo, looks to all the possible chances on the cards. There *are* sometimes slips between cup and lip, you know."

"At all events," returned the Fattore, sullenly, "I think even you must feel that you have not behaved to me brotherly or handsomely in this matter."

"Brother Carlo," replied the jeweller, with a pleasant smile, throwing himself back in his chair, and crossing one long black cloth-covered leg over the knee of the other, so as to show the silk stocking and elegantly made shoe with its small golden buckle on the foot so exposed to the best advantage, while a deprecatory wave of the gold double eye-glass eloquently expressed the speaker's profound sense of his own vast superiority in intelligence and station to his rustic brother,—"Brother Carlo, I am afraid, that experience of the world does not justify us in thinking that brotherly treatment, as you say, is exactly that which one man would wish to receive from another. Surely I have behaved to you in a much more satisfactory manner than the first brother did to his younger! Ha! ha! ha! And then, my dear Carlo, as to handsome treatment, I really do not know what is meant by the phrase. Probably your notion and most men's notion of handsome treatment is treatment somewhat better than what they would be disposed to show to others. Eh, brother Carlo? These phrases, you see, have little

meaning for plain common-sense men. Handsome! I don't pretend to handsomeness in anything. If my conduct is upright and straightforward, that is enough for a plain tradesman like me."

During this long speech, in the delivery of which his brother seemed to take infinite relish, the Fattore had fancied that he saw a scheme for stealing a march upon his elder in this matter;—a bull-terrier's attempt to surprise a weasel napping!

"Well!" said he, "I like to do things handsome myself, as well as to be done handsome by; but then I am country bred, which no doubt makes all the difference."

"Just so, brother, *all* the difference!" said the city man, with a smiling bow.

"Any way," continued his brother, "it would be folly for us to fall out, when it is so clearly the interest of both of us to act together and remain friends."

"I think so, indeed," acquiesced the jeweller with a shrug of the shoulders.

"We both fully intend that the marriage you have spoken of shall take place, and our property shall thus be kept together?"

"That is most certainly my wish, as it always has been."

"And I can assure you, it is my wish, and my intention also. Now, I like, as I said, to do things what I consider handsomely. It is my way. We in the country like that sort of way. Now look here, brother. Let me be the mortgagee of the Palazzo entirely, including the agreement you have recently made with the Marchese. I will find the money; and you can withdraw your capital to make it useful

elsewhere. And I on my part will at once settle the property on Nanni, and on his children by your daughter—the Palazzo to be theirs on the day of their marriage. I hope you will think that a handsome offer."

"Indeed it is! So much so, my dear brother," said the jeweller, who now at once perceived that his brother felt certain that the marriage would never take place, "that I really should not be justified in accepting it. Nay! nay! we city men, if we do not talk about behaving handsomely, still know what is just and fair. That would not be fair on you. Both the boy and the girl will bring with them a very pretty contribution to the common fund; and I have set my heart on making the young couple a present of the Palazzo. For to let you into a secret, Carlo, I too had determined to put them in possession of the house on their marriage-day. We are not all of us such bad fellows in the city, after all; eh, brother Carlo?"

And the old money-lender looked at his brother with his head on one side, and one eye closed, with an expression, the real meaning of which was: "I hope you find yourself detected and floored! You thought to make *me* jump at such a clumsily-baited hook as that, did you?"

The farmer felt that he *was* floored; and that all hope of ever possessing Palazzo Lunardi had passed away from him and his for ever. He felt sure that his brother had discovered Laura's unwillingness for the match, and that poor Nanni had said no more than the truth in his frequent declarations that it was labour lost to make love to his cousin, for that she "would not look at him." He had great diffi-

culty in so far controlling himself as to abstain from coming to an open rupture with his brother, and indulging himself by pouring out the torrent of abuse which was shut up in his heart, and which he felt was making it necessary for him to submit to be blooded as soon as he should get home. But he contented himself with saying doggedly, as he took up his broad-leaved farmer's hat to go:

"Well! *fratello mio*, I suppose you know your own affairs best. But it strikes me, that you do not eel quite so certain that this marriage will ever take place. If it should not, I trust my niece may do as well elsewhere. As for Nanni, there is no want of advantageous matches for him, let me tell you. Nanni's bid for, he is. And let me whisper in your ear, brother Giuseppe, that if you have got the lion's share up here in the city, I have not got the jackal's share in the Casentino. Trust Carlo Palli for knowing which is the sunniest vineyard, and the fattest pasture land, if he knows nothing else."

"I am sure I shall be well contented with my share," returned his brother with a courteous smile, especially as it is your way to do things handsomely, you know, down in the country; eh, brother?"

And so they separated, the Fattore muttering as he walked off the bridge:

"He makes me sick, *per bacco*, with his smiling, cool, self-satisfied, hypocritical ways. I begin to think Nanni's in the right of it, to have nothing to say to the lot of them. He can stand well enough on his own ground, thank the saints! And yet, when one thinks of the division of the land, *per bacco*, it is a pity too!"

"Ha! ha! poor Carlo," sneered the other to him-

self, when left alone in his den, as unruffled as he had been before the conversation. "Poor Carlo! there is a man without heart enough to be open-hearted, and not brains enough to be close-hearted. And he to think of getting round *me* in that silly way! If I could have but been sure of Laura," thought he to himself, "I could have made him put his head into a nice noose. If I had offered to let him in to half the mortgage on the condition that whichever party declined the marriage should forfeit the half share of the palace, he would have jumped at it like a gudgeon at a fly. For I see plainly enough that Nanni has learned from Laura that there is no chance for him with her; and he probably is looking out elsewhere. Ay! that would have been a very pretty stroke, and would have served Master Carlo right well. But Laura would not have acted her part in the play! I might have been the bitten instead of the biter. *Pazienza!* One can but make the best of the cards in one's hand!"

And with these thoughts the old gentleman turned calmly to the inspection of his ledgers.

CHAPTER II.

THE TWO COUSINS.

MEANWHILE the conversation which had passed between Laura and her father had not left her in a tranquil or happy state of mind. Her first feeling—when, after her father's departure to his accustomed evening attendance on his business, she was able to think over what had passed between them in the freedom and tranquillity of solitude—had been one of satisfaction at the degree of mutual understanding at which they had arrived. It was a comfort to her to feel that at least there was now no farther any secret between them as to her determination to reject the proposals of her cousin. She did not attach much importance to her father's parting expression of hope that she would think better of this decision. She felt sure that he knew her well enough to expect no such change of sentiment from her, after what had been said. She had little doubt that he was convinced that the proposed match must be given up. He was no longer living in a fool's paradise of false hope on this point. She had performed the principal duty of letting him know that she could not conform to his wishes on this subject; and this was certainly a great comfort.

That she had thus far acted rightly, that it *was* her duty to make this resistance, she had no doubt at all. No motive, no consideration, could make it right or pardonable for her to suffer herself to be persuaded or coerced into marrying one man, when she had given all her heart to another. This was clear, and all was right so far.

But was it equally certain that she had done well in giving the spontaneous promise which she had offered to her father? She had bound herself by a solemn promise to make no marriage without his consent. Was this entirely consistent with her duty to another, and with another promise, which she had made? She had told Sebastian to rely on her; she had promised to be strong for him, as well as to be faithful to him. Had she been so? She vividly recalled that conversation, now some months ago, when she had reproached him for his want of trustful and hopeful courage, and had dared to offer her strength in support of his weakness. Had she justified her appeal to his confidence in her affection? Again and again her mind went over all her code of ethics, and argued the case against her heart, which reproached her for deserting her love. And she ended by coming to a conclusion which justified herself. She thought that she had made up her mind, that reason was right and heart wrong in the matter. She could not bring herself to think that she owed nothing to her father on this point; that she should be justified in seeking her own happiness at the cost of blighting the remainder of his life; that it would be right for her to follow her own judgment in this matter in open defiance of his opinion, and wish, and authority. Yes! She thought she had acted rightly. And if

Sebastian were there that minute, she would still have bid him trust and hope, as she still trusted and hoped herself. Suppose Nanni married to another, and all hope of that marriage therefore at an end; suppose Sebastian to have achieved some portion of the success his genius merited, and to have shown himself to be something better than a mendicant patrician; suppose too, above all, that her constancy in refusing all other proposals should have convinced her father that he must accept the successful composer for a son-in-law, or none at all; was it not to be expected that he would, under such circumstances, yield, and give his consent to a marriage with the man of her choice? Surely he would do so! No time would be too long to wait! Courage! patience! constancy! and the goal should be reached at last.

Nevertheless, go over the ground as often as she would, she could not recover her usual tone of cheerfulness. The promise she had given seemed to stand as an impassable barrier between her and her happiness, which had not existed before, and which had been raised by her own act. Not that she repented of the act. She was quite decided that, were the thing to be done again, she would again do as she had done. She was convinced that she had acted rightly, but the conviction did not suffice to make her happy.

She was sitting at her drawing-table with an unfinished design before her, trying to occupy her mind as well as her fingers with the work, but vainly striving to withdraw her thoughts from the subject which had become their habitual pre-occupation, on that October morning on which farmer Carlo and his son arrived, as has been seen, in the capital. She

little expected to see her cousin; for the Fattore had judged it expedient, with a view to the business he had in hand, to arrive at the shop on the Ponte Vecchio unannounced. But Nanni, on parting with his father, when the latter went to his interview with the jeweller, had betaken himself to his uncle's house with considerably more alacrity than when he had before made a similar visit, with the consciousness that he was going to the uphill work of making love to his cousin. Now he was anxious to tell Laura of the conversation he had had with his father on the journey. His conscience had rather reproached him with having failed in carrying out his contract with her as thoroughly and fairly as he ought to have done, in the matter of taking on himself his share of the responsibility of breaking off the marriage their seniors were bent on bringing about. And now he was eager to tell her that he had spoken out to his father.

Laura jumped up from her drawing, as he came in, and ran across the room to meet him.

"Cousin Nanni! who dreamed of your coming to Florence?"

"I did, cousin Laura; I have dreamed of coming to Florence many a time of late. But I only dreamed it; for I knew nothing of our coming till the night before we started. *Babbo* made up his mind to come all of a sudden. You may guess I made no objection!"

"I am so glad to see you; for do you know, Nanni, I have got something to tell you!" And Laura nodded her pretty little head gravely, as she stood facing Nanni and looking up at him, while he held both of her hands in his.

"And I am so glad to see you, cousin Laura, for, do you know, I have got something to tell you," said he, nodding his head in imitation of hers.

"*Davvero ?** Out with it, Nanni. I suppose you and Caterina . . . ."

"*Che ! che !* † No such luck ! But what is it you have to tell ?"

"No ! no ! you speak first. I can keep my secret till you have told yours."

"No ! you speak first. Didn't you say first you had something to tell ?"

"Well ! we must not waste our time in nonsense ; for Aunt Giuditta will come home from her marketing in a minute, and then we can't talk, unless she goes out into the kitchen."

"Make haste then. Has anything happened ?"

"Only this, Nanni ! that I have been a brave girl, and stood to my colours. The other day my father came home quite in high spirits, and said that he had bought a house, which he hoped to see me mistress of very shortly. You can guess what that meant. So out it all came."

"You did not say a word of Caterina ?"

"*Che !* do you think it ? No, I merely spoke for myself ; and gave no reasons. I said that you and I were excellent good friends and cousins, but that we could never be more."

"Bravo, Laura ! and how did my uncle take it ?"

"It was painful, very painful to me, Nanni, but it had to be said, you know. He was not violent. He is never violent. But, you see, he could not enter

* "Indeed."

† "What ! what !" equivalent to "Pooh ! pooh !"

into my feelings on the subject; and I am afraid he thought that I was acting very badly."

"But if you felt sure, Laura . . . ."

"Yes! I know that it is right; otherwise I would not have said all I did that day up at Schifanoia, that day which has made us fast friends for ever—has it not, Nanni?"

"For ever, dear cousin! fast friends, instead of very badly fastened man and wife. That is about it."

"No! I have no doubt at all about it. It was right so far. But none the less for that, it was very painful to me to grieve him. He has always been a very good father to me, Nanni."

"But did he threaten you? Did he speak of forcing you in any way?" said Nanni, with an anxious interest in his manner which, despite her small inclination for mirth at that moment, brought an amused smile on Laura's lips, as she answered, with a slight flavour of archness:

"Don't be alarmed, cousin. He won't force me. We are not in danger!"

"Oh no!" rejoined Nanni, simply, and without the least comprehension of the meaning of his cousin's smile; "we are in no danger, so far as that goes. And that brings me to what I had to say to you, cousin. I've been and done it too;" added he, raising his eyebrows and nodding his head up and down with much significance.

"Have you told your father?" asked Laura, with quite as much interest in her manner as he had manifested.

"I did. Yesterday morning, while we were at breakfast at the inn on the top of the Consuma, I spake out."

"Did you make your father clearly understand how very intolerable such a marriage would be to your feelings, cousin Nanni?" asked Laura, demurely, with a touch of female coquetry, just sufficient to prove the trueness of her descent from mother Eve.

"Not I!" said honest Nanni, with invincible simplicity; "Where was the need of telling any lies about it?"

Laura was on the point of saying something, which a second thought induced her to suppress. As it was, she only replied, looking up into his face with a franker smile than her last—

"But what did you tell him then, Nanni?"

"Well! he said something about your father's intention that the two branches of the family must be united—willy, nilly; and then I told him plain enough, that I was not the man to take a wife who was forced upon me against her will, and that for all my uncle might say 'shall be,' I should say for myself 'shan't be.' That's what I told him."

"But was that quite fair play, Nanni? That was leaving all the responsibility of the refusal on my shoulders, you know, which was not according to our agreement," said Laura, not feeling at the bottom of her woman's heart any great resentment against her cousin for his mode of putting the matter.

"But what could I say, you know?" argued Nanni, without a shadow of slyness or second meaning in his voice or in his mind. "What could I say, when Babbo went on about your being the prettiest girl in Florence, and one that any man, barring a born fool, would jump at for a wife? I couldn't gainsay it; how could I? If I had told him that to my mind you

were plain and *poco simpatica,** he would not have believed a word I said. Lord bless you! he knows better than that, Babbo does. I *did* give him to understand, that I knew of one who, if she wasn't first, was any way second to no other, be she who she would; and one that I thought might not need any father to force her."

"Oh! you did come to that, did you? Well done, Nanni! I would have forgiven you, if you had said, as I am sure you think, and ought to think, that she is for you far the first in all Florence, and all Tuscany. Well! and now it is my turn to ask how *your* father received your communication."

"Well! there was not much to complain of. Babbo takes most things easy. He told me I was a born fool; too big a fool to know what was good for me, and too obstinate a mule to listen to those that have wit to know better. Of course I was not a-going to make more words by gainsaying anything of that."

"But did my uncle come to see that it could not be? Do you think he has given up the idea of such a marriage? Because, if so . . . ."

"Well! I think he is pretty much off it. For there is another point, that counts for more than you would think for with him. You see he came to think that my uncle was minded to force the match whether or no, out of his own head like. Now, you see, Laura, we country folk don't like being ridden over, and

* "Not agreeable." But that phrase does not give a quarter of the meaning of "simpatica," which a Tuscan, in speaking of a girl, uses positively and not relatively only to the speaker. It is the highest praise that can be accorded to a woman, and means that she has all the qualities which can make a man fall in love with her.

our affairs settled for us, without either with your leave or by your leave, by city-bred people in that way. Babbo has always had a bit of a notion in the back part of his mind, that my uncle plays the elder brother a little too strong, you see. And this partly put him up to be ready to say 'no,' if your father said 'yes,' a bit too loud, you understand."

"Is my uncle gone to the Ponte Vecchio this morning?" asked Laura.

"Yes! he went straight off to have a talk with your father, when I came here."

"I trust to Heaven they will not come to a quarrel about it. That would be a fresh trouble!"

"Oh! not they! They know better than that."

"But, I say, Nanni, what business had you to come here, sir, directly on arriving at Florence, before you had been somewhere else first? I shall tell Caterina of you."

"Tell away, Laura. In the first place, I came here directly, because I was in a hurry to tell you all about the talk between Babbo and me yesterday morning. In the next place, don't you see, that ten to one at this time in the morning Caterina's alone in the house, with nobody but that little slip of a servant-girl;—or may be all alone, if the girl has gone out. And being all by herself in the house, it would not do, don't you see? I shall go there when her father and the Gobbo come home at mid-day."

"To think of you becoming a model of discretion, Nanni! But when do you mean to say the important word in Caterina's little ear? The way seems open, since your talk with your father. I think, if I were you, I should take the opportunity before your father perhaps may be in a different humour."

"I was thinking of speaking quietly to the Gobbo, Laura mia. What do you advise? What kind of a creature is he, the poor Gobbo? Caterina is very fond of him any way."

"Of course I don't know much, but from what I have seen, I like poor Sandro Boccanera. I think you would do well to trust him. And indeed it's ten to one that he knows all that you could tell him about his sister and you, just as well or better than you do. He has a wonderful knack of knowing all about everybody's business, has the Gobbo Boccanera."

"You think I might trust him to keep a secret?"

"I think you might safely; but why keep it a secret, Nanni, and for how long?" asked Laura, meditatively.

"Why, for one thing; you see, poor Simone might be afraid of getting into hot water with your father about it. If it were once well settled that there was to be nothing between you and me . . . . . but they all know—of course all Florence knows that that is what has been looked to."

"But, on the other hand, you see, Nanni mio, the knowledge that you were betrothed to Caterina Boccanera might make matters much easier for me with my father. Don't you see, Nanni?" said Laura, pleadingly.

"Aha! my pretty cousin!" said Nanni, making her a low bow, "that's where the hare breaks cover, is it? You *have*, then, certain matters to be made easy,—you too? When I told you that day up at Schifanoia, that it was not fair for you to know all my secrets, and tell me no word of yours in return, you protested you had no secrets to tell."

"Certainly, I had none to tell, for I did not mean to tell any! But what have I said to make you suppose that I have any secrets either to tell or to keep?"

"Come, now, Laura, play fair! there is a good cousin. I have been open with you."

"But why are you so persuaded that I have anything to tell? . . . . Ah! I see it! You think that nothing save some precious attachment could have made me insensible to your addresses; is not that it, cousin Nanni?"

"May be that is it; and may be it isn't. Never mind why I think it! Come, out with it, Laura! Why, how can we help one another, as perhaps we might, if you keep all to yourself, and won't put any confidence in me?" pleaded Nanni, half piqued.

"Confidence, Nanni! Have I not treated you with the utmost confidence?"

"It has been a very one-sided sort of confidence between us, I think! I have told you all, and you have told me nothing."

"I am sure I spoke the truth when I said that I had no secret to tell," replied Laura, with her eyes bent down on the little drawing-table by the side of which she was standing, while she began nervously fingering the things upon it.

"What! back to that again, Laura? You won't trust me then! Is that to be the last word?" said Nanni.

"What is the use of telling what you must know very well already?" pleaded Laura, with her eyes still riveted on the table.

"I! I have not a notion what you mean! Nobody has ever told me anything, upon my honour. *Dav-*

vero, davvero, Laura, I have never heard a word about it."

"But there are other ways of knowing without being told, cousin. Do you mean to say that you can't guess?"

"Not I! I never was good at guessing. I always give up directly. So you may as well tell at once."

"No! you must guess. You can't guess wrong," faltered Laura.

"What nonsense. Do I know him?"

"Oh yes! you know him. You have seen him here," said Laura, blushing, as she directed the blundering seeker so nearly to the locality of her hidden treasure.

"I know him; and I have seen him here!" repeated Nanni, ponderingly, in a manner which showed that his ignorance on the subject was genuine.

Laura was irritated at his slow want of comprehension. She was provoked at his not having perceived that which she would have at the time been much annoyed at his perceiving; and which she had used all possible precaution to veil from his observation.

"Yes, you know him, and you have met him here . . . . at dinner. And now, if you don't know, I shall tell you nothing more."

"Here at dinner? Why, you don't mean young Lunardi!" cried maladroit Nanni.

"Why not, pray?" cried Laura, firing up in an instant, and raising her head and eyes to flash a defiant look at him. "Is there any reason why any girl should not be proud of the love of Sebastian de' Lunardi?"

"Nay, I never said so, or thought so, Laura; so you need not look at me in that way. Only it seemed so . . . . so out of the way;" stammered her cousin, aware that he was making a mess of it, but vainly attempting to find some inoffensive word to express his feeling.

"Out of the way! And why, pray, out of the way?"

"Well, I don't know!—out of *our* way! He is a noble."

"True! That circumstance might have kept some people apart. It has not kept us apart. I love him neither the more nor the less for his noble ancestry; and I do not think he would like me a bit the better if I were descended from the Queen of Sheba. Any thing else out of the way?"

"Don't be so fierce about it, cousin Laura! I did not mean to say anything against him, nor anything to offend you. But then, in the next place, I fancy he has little or nothing in the world to live on."

"Has Caterina Boccanera got much?"

"Nay, but that is different, you know. Come now, Laura, you must admit that that is a different thing. I shall have money, if Caterina has none!"

"Well, cousin Nanni, and as my father tells me, I shall have fortune, if Sebastian has none."

"Ah! but will my uncle like that his money should go where there is none to match it?"

"I might ask whether *my* uncle will like *his* money to go where there is none to match it," urged Laura; "but all these considerations," she continued, "may be difficulties in the way to be got over, but cannot be reasons either for or against a man himself, or against a woman either."

"And I am sure I never meant to say anything against Signor Sebastian himself. May be," he added meditatively, and speaking rather to himself than to his cousin; "may be he is stronger than he looks!"

"Stronger!" echoed Laura; "he is strong enough for his occupations. It is not every one who has to pass his life looking after oxen and ploughs, you know, Nanni!"

"That's true," said Nanni, simply. "I believe he is a musician, is not he?"

"Yes, he is a composer. He has an immense talent; and will, I hope, live to make a great name."

"I am sure I hope he may, if that is what he wants, for your sake, Laura."

"But I hope you will come to wish it for his sake. I must have you and Sebastian great friends, Nanni mio."

"With all my heart! I only wish his line of business was anything I could be of use to him in."

"That's not so unlikely as you may suppose, Nanni. A time is coming presently when I think you might be of much service to him, if you were disposed to."

"What is it? Only you tell me, Laura, and you shall see whether I am disposed or no!"

"Why, it is this. We are looking forward very anxiously to the success of an opera which he is at work on. It is to be brought out at the beginning of Carnival. Very much may depend on the success of it. And the success does not always depend altogether on the merit of the work. A good party of stout friends in the theatre!—you understand! Sebastian won't hear of taking any such means.

He is too high-minded to do what the others do. We must not say a word to him about it. You understand?"

"All right! Mum is the word! And when the time comes, just you give me the hint, and I will bring you half-a-dozen lads from the Casentino that will make more noise with their clapping than a whole theatre full of Florentines!"

"Bravo, Nanni! And now that is the last of my secrets; you know them all now."

"That is something like fair play," returned he. "And now I shall run off to Caterina, for it's near midday, and the men will be home to dinner. *A rivederla stasera!*"*

* "Adieu till this evening."

CHAPTER III.

NANNI OBTAINS A "YES."

THERE were reasons beyond the rules of ordinary etiquette, not very rigorously observed by the classes to which Caterina Boccanera and Nanni Palli belonged, which made the latter prefer to delay his visit till the hour at which his mistress's father and brother would be at home. Laura had attributed his delicacy wholly to this cause, feeling some surprise that he should think it necessary to be so punctilious. But the fact was that the Gobbo had found means to let the handsome young farmer see that his visits and attention to Caterina were not acceptable to her family. Poor old Maestro Simone lived far too much in the clouds to see or occupy himself much about such terrestrial matters. But the Gobbo was wide awake enough; and quite disposed to take good care of his pretty sister in this respest. Had Nanni Palli, the well-to-do son of the rich *fattore* in the Casentino, been understood to be a free man as regarded matters matrimonial, of course the only possible objection to him as a suitor to Caterina would have been the too great superiority of his social position to hers; a difference, which, after all, was not so great as to involve any insuperable obstacle to a

marriage between them. But everybody knew that Nanni Palli was destined for his beautiful and wealthy cousin, the jeweller's heiress; and the match was too evidently a natural and desirable one, for any one to doubt that it would be carried into effect.

Under these circumstances the Gobbo felt, reasonably enough, that Nanni Palli had no business to be dangling after his sister; and sharp words had of late passed between him and Caterina on the subject, in consequence of his having observed that she was inclined to afford the handsome Lothario an amount of encouragement and opportunity which he deemed by no means right or prudent. Nor was it at all like Caterina to be guilty of anything of the kind. Though full of animation, spirit, and fun, laughter-loving as Venus herself, and disposed to enjoy to the utmost that licence of associating with the young of the other sex which the habits of society deny almost entirely to girls of the classes superior to her own in Italy, Caterina had never run any risk of permitting her name to be coupled with that of any one of the young men of her acquaintance by the gossips of their quarter. And to do her justice, it must be said, that if Nanni had contrived to effect a lodgment to a more or less serious degree in her heart, that fact had tended to make her more instead of less cautious and discreet in her intercourse with him, on the frequent occasions of his visits to Florence,—till latterly.

The reader, who remembers the conversation between her and Laura, previous to the party at the jeweller's villa, will be able to guess at the reason of this difference. But Caterina had more solid ground on which to base the difference of her conduct

towards Nanni than was furnished by that conversation alone. They had gone up the hill to Schifanoia in the morning, and had returned down the hill in the evening in the same carriage opposite to each other. But a vast deal more love-making had been put into the short drive down the hill than into the long drive up. This, perhaps, is in some degree a general law in the matter of morning journeys to, and evening returns from picnic parties. But it was not merely in obedience to such a law that Caterina and her lover,—now avowedly such—had put the time to so much better profit on the second opportunity. That tête-à-tête walk of the two cousins in the Schifanoia shrubberies had intervened between the two drives; and the result was, that Nanni spoke out—or rather whispered in, for his uncle was sitting by his side—in a manner which he had never ventured to use before. And the previous conversation with Laura had prepared Caterina to listen to him as she never would have done before. But as Nanni did not judge it to be prudent, or, to say the more exact truth, as he could not yet screw his courage up to the point of declaring his intention of rebelling in the matter of the family marriage-scheme, poor Caterina was placed in a false and uncomfortable position before her family. And the resolution of speaking with the Gobbo, which Nanni had announced to his cousin, had been taken with the view of putting himself on a proper footing with Caterina's relatives, now that his explanation with his father enabled him to do so.

It was but a few minutes after the clock of the Piazza had sounded midday, that Nanni reached the door of the house occupied by the Boccaneras; and

he feared that he should have to wait yet awhile for their return. For he was quite determined to make no attempt to see Caterina in their absence. But the Tuscan artisan, if he be punctual in nothing else, is punctual in quitting his work, be it what it may, at the blessed hour of noon. And in a minute or two Nanni saw his uncle's partner and his son coming leisurely along the street towards their home.

"Good day, 'gnor Simone; good day, Sandro!" said Nanni, as they came up. "I arrived in Florence only this morning, and I came to call on you, you see, one of the first things."

"We saw your excellent father, Signore, on the bridge this morning. He came to speak with the *padrone*," said Master Simon.

"I have the honour to wish you a very good day, Signor Nanni. Your *Signore Padre* had business with his brother my father's partner, as my father has remarked. I presume that that business was the object of your visit to Florence?" said the Gobbo, in the wordy and stilted manner which he affected, and which was a little intensified on the present occasion by the feeling of hostility that had been engendered in his mind towards Nanni.

"Yes! that was what brought my father to Florence. But that need not have brought me, you know. My business is of a pleasanter kind, I guess; —and the main part of it was to pay a visit to you."

"We are very highly honoured by your obliging condescension, Signore; but if, as is perhaps not improbable, any part of your attention was intended for my sister, I fear that she will not be able to profit by it to-day."

"No! this time, Signor Sandro, my visit is mainly meant for you. I want to have a talk, you and I together. And if you will spare me a few minutes, while Maestro Simone goes in to see if the dinner is ready, I shall take it as a kindness. We can take a turn in the Piazza Santa Croce."

The Gobbo was much puzzled to guess what was coming; but he was rather gratified by the notion that a well-made fellow with a straight back should have in some way or other need of him; and specially pleased by the idea that he was to hear a secret of some sort; since Nanni evidently did not choose to speak before his father. So he replied, with a magnificent wave of the hand;

"Signore, I am at your service. Lead on, I attend you. Father, Signor Palli and I have business together. Go to dinner, I pray you, and do not wait for me. It may be I may be detained."

"*Che! che!* I won't keep you many minutes. What I want to say is soon said, when once one has made up one's mind to say it. Look here, my dear fellow. You have thought that I have been looking too much after *La Caterina*, haven't you?"

The poor Gobbo rather liked being called "my dear fellow" by a strapping young chap six feet high; but he thought that the familiarity was somewhat out of place upon the present occasion, so he answered:

"I will not deny, Signor Palli, that I *have* thought that it would be more prudent if, under the circumstances, you were to take somewhat less notice of my sister. You will forgive my saying that perhaps you may naturally, in your position, fail to appreciate as highly as we do the duty of maintaining the reputa-

tion of an ancient name spotless. We of noble blood are wont to attribute a great—the rest of the world may possibly think an exaggerated—importance to these matters."

"What! are you noble too? *Per Bacco!* well, I am glad of that too, for a certain reason," cried Nanni, who had never happened to have heard of the claims of the working jeweller to descent from an ancient and noble stock.

"Sir!" cried the Gobbo, "I do not understand you. I know not what reason you may have to rejoice in the fact, which most unaccountably appears to reach you now for the first time. But I shall take leave to tell you, that ignorance of that fact, sir, does not imply a very perfect acquaintance with the annals of our country."

"No doubt! I make no doubt but you are right! But if we begin about the annals of the country, dinner will be cold before you get back. You shall tell me all about that another time. Let's come straight to the matter in hand. You said this minute that you did not like me to be about your sister so much 'under the circumstances.' Now, I want to know what circumstances you mean. That seems to me the way to go straightest at it."

But the Gobbo, like a true Florentine, was unused to go straight, as countrified Nanni phrased it, at the object of his discourse. Your true Florentine cockney likes talking too well to cut it short by going directly to the aim and end of it. Then also he has so many *riguardi* to pay attention to—so many considerations to bear in mind—so much caution to use, lest this person should by possibility be offended, or that other person by any chance have his suscep-

tibilities wounded—so many laws of conversational * etiquette to observe,—that he can rarely be induced to say exactly what he means and all he means in plain, straightforward, and therefore short words. He deems it even coarse and uncourteous to do so. He don't tell you a fact; he allows you to understand it. He shrinks from the audacity of expressing a decided opinion; but carefully metes out to you a sufficient amount of hints—and not more than sufficient—to enable you to divine his sentiments. To all which, in the case of the poor Gobbo, had to be added a special fondness for the wordy pomposity of the diplomatic style of intercourse. So that bluff Nanni's rude country fashion of discourse scared and scandalised him, and made it difficult for him to treat the matter in hand after his own method.

"It surprises me that your worship * should find it necessary to recur to me for an explanation of the phrase," he said, after a pause; "surely your worship must be aware of circumstances in your worship's position which might have the effect of giving rise to the difficulties which I have had the honour of pointing out to your worship's notice."

"I say, 'gnor Sandro, let us drop the *Vossignoria*. You'll get back to dinner all the sooner. And never mind what I am aware of or not aware of. I want to know what your notion of the matter is. So never mind the *riguardi*, and speak it out plain."

"*Signore mio*," said the Gobbo, thus urged; "there are attentions which, as it appears to me, might be flattering to the family of a well-born maiden, if paid by one unbound by other ties, but which take a very

* "*Vossignoria*" would have been the Gobbo's phrase. It is impossible to give in English an exact conversational equivalent.

different appearance when proceeding from one who is already betrothed to another."

"That is to say, as I understand, that I ought not to make love to *La Caterina*, because I am engaged to be married to another person."

"Since it is your worship's pleasure to put the matter into words so painfully direct, I will admit that that is my meaning."

"Very good! now, *caro mio*, listen to me. Can you keep a secret?"

This was bringing the conversation on ground more to the Gobbo's taste, and he answered more readily:

"Anything, my dear sir, that you may think fit to confide to me will, I can undertake to assure you, be as safe in my breast as in your own."

"My secret need only be kept for awhile. Listen! Signor Giuseppe Palli the jeweller, and Signor Carlo Palli the fattore, may say and think what they will; but Laura don't mean to marry me, and I don't mean to marry Laura. What do you say to that?"

"Truly, Signore, I am much surprised. I confess that I am greatly surprised. But since you have chosen to honour me with your confidence, Signor Nanni, may I ask the reason why you and the Signorina have determined on . . . . on . . . . pursuing a different line of conduct from that which had been marked out for you both?"

"Aha, friend Sandro! there we come to the greatest secret of all! Hark in your ear! Why? Because it so happens that we both love somebody else."

"Dear me! both! how strange a fatality! And

La Signorina Laura, you say, she is in the same mind?"

"We understand each other, I tell you! We have talked it all over together, bless you. We are the best friends in the world, Laura and I are."

"And so you have agreed together that you won't have anything to say to each other?"

"That is just about it. And now, Signor Sandro Boccanera, you see I am unbound by other ties, as you call it."

"In your own eyes; but not in those of your *Signor Padre*. What will he say, when he is made aware of your determination? and, *per Bacco!* what will the *padroni*, that is to say, what will my father's partner, the Signor Giuseppe, say?"

"Well! my father knows it all pretty well by this time. And I take it my uncle is not very far off from having found out as much. Laura has told him her mind on the matter; and I suspect he knows her well enough to be pretty sure that he must take her at her word."

"It must have been a very bitter pill to him! I know enough to be very sure of that! And, since you wish me to be made acquainted with these circumstances, may I ask, my dear sir, who is the man who has been fortunate enough to obtain the affection of *La Signorina Laura?* I have but little doubt that I can guess who it is; but perhaps you may wish that I should know the fact with certainty."

"No; that's Laura's secret. I am come here to tell you mine. It's odd, though, that you should think you can guess the man!" said Nanni, remembering how far he was from making the same guess.

"Ah! perhaps lookers-on see most of that game,

as well as of others," said the poor Gobbo, with a sigh; "but, as you say," he continued, "that we are not to speak of *La Signorina Laura's* secrets, let us say no more about it."

"Well, now, *amico mio*, let us see whether you can be equally sharp at guessing my secret. Who do you suppose it is I love well enough to make me content to give up all the advantages of a marriage with my cousin. For advantage there would not be a little, let me tell you. Can you guess this too, *Sandro mio?*"

"Well, Signor Nanni, I won't pretend to say that I do not guess whom you mean; but truly I should never have dreamed of making such a guess half an hour ago!"

"But now you do guess; and that's enough. And now that we have at last got to the point," said Nanni, with an expression of having suffered much fatigue in the process of doing so, "what do you say about my going back home with you to pay your sister a visit? From one unbound by other ties, you know;—how was it you said it. But I take it you meant there was no harm in an honest man paying his court to a girl, if his meaning was upright and honourable. Wasn't that it?"

"Signor Palli, you speak frankly; for my part I love frankness and plainspeaking. I will therefore say that I do not see, as far as the bearings of the question are now before me, any reason why I should not admit that my meaning was as you state it."

"My dear fellow, listening to the talk of you Florentines, often puts me in mind of hunting down a hare, that keeps doubling and doubling, and won't

run straight for a hundred yards together. But one runs into them at last. So now, to run you to earth, I ask whether I may hope for the approval and countenance of your father and yourself in begging Caterina to be my wife; yes or no?"

The stalwart farmer stopped short in his walk, and facing about, stood planted firmly on his two feet in front of his small companion, as if to prevent him from doubling about any further in his discourse, and force a direct yes or no out of him.

"*Signore mio!*" cried the little man, thus pushed, shrugging his shoulders yet higher than nature had placed them, with his intelligent triangular face and great handsome brown eyes turned up to meet the downward look of tall Nanni, and his two hands held out with their palms turned upwards, "*Signore mio*, what would you have me say to you? That such a marriage as you speak of would be more than all our modest ambition could wish for my sister is clear enough. But will there not be difficulty with your excellent father; and very possibly also with your highly respected uncle, who is also my father's partner in business? Will these gentlemen be likely to approve your choice? For you must permit me to observe, my most highly valued sir, that although the marriage you contemplate would be, as I have said——"

"Don't say it over again then, there's a good fellow!" pleaded Nanni.

"Pardon me, *padrone mio colendissimo*,* it is necessary that I should speak my sentiments. Though a marriage between *vossignoria* and my

* "My most to be reverenced master."

sister would be in every respect all, and more than all we could wish for her, neither *La Caterina* for herself nor her family for her would consent to her entering a family against the will of its chiefs."

"Not against my father's consent;—that is reasonable. But you do not mean to say that if my father was agreeable, you would stop to ask what my uncle thought about it! *Misericordia!** If you come to that, what would become of a man who had half-a-dozen uncles?"

"I am not prepared to say that if your *Signore Padre* were fully consenting to such a match, the approval of your uncle ought to be deemed absolutely an essential condition. But in the position in which we stand with reference to your respected uncle, it would be perhaps difficult to make such a marriage in defiance of his wishes."

"Well, 'gnor Sandro, I won't deny that my father wished me to make a match of it with my cousin Laura. That was his plan. It was all settled with my uncle; only it wasn't all settled with Laura and me. And now my father knows that it is not to be. I've told him my mind on the matter, and he has told me his. But he don't expect any longer that I and Laura are to be man and wife. And I tell you, he won't stand out against my wishes in the matter. I have no fear of having his consent. And as for my uncle, look you, if I am not to marry his daughter, I fancy it won't make two straws difference to him what becomes of me in the matter of marriage or any other. That's what I think."

By this time the two young men had recommenced

* A common Tuscan exclamation; of which it is difficult to give the full force. "A pretty story, indeed!" perhaps comes near it.

their walk up and down the Piazza in front of the great doors of Santa Croce. They walked in silence a few paces, when Nanni said suddenly,

"Well! now I suppose I may come back with you and see what *La Caterina* will say to me, eh Sandro? Are you willing to have me for a brother-in-law?" he continued, putting out his hand to the Gobbo as he spoke.

Poor Sandro took his hand in both of his, and looking up into his companion's bluff, handsome, jolly face with a sad smile in his large brown eyes, said,

"It is little good I can be, such as you see me, Signor Nanni, either as a brother-in-law or in any other way, God help me! But you know the old story of the lion and the mouse; and if you will call me your friend, I shall be proud, if I should ever have an opportunity, to show myself such!"

"Done! and done, for a bargain!" cried Nanni, striking his great broad brown palm on the slender emaciated hand of the Gobbo; "and don't you think to belittle yourself. I have heard tell of a country where they count a man's height from the bridge of his nose upwards. And faith, in that country you would be the taller man of us two."

"It is very kind of you to say so," returned the hunchback; "but I am afraid that country must be too far off for me ever to hope to see it."

"Well! I have heard people talk of your cleverness, I can tell you, without going far from where we are now standing. Brains are a very fine thing, and that's just the article I am short of, by all accounts."

"I doubt your being very short of them, *amico mio*, though may be you have not used yours as much as I have mine. That makes all the difference."

"Well! you help me with your brains, and if ever you want the help of a stronger fist than your own, there is one that you may use whenever you need it. Is it a bargain?"

"Done, and done again!" answered the Gobbo, with a brighter smile than before. "If the brains are as good after their kind as the fist is, I will be content."

"I dare say I shall need you oftener than you are like to need me. I want you to begin your part of the bargain at once. You must undertake to plead my cause with your father. I can tackle *la Caterina*, heaven bless her, myself. I think somehow or other one can talk to a girl when one's very fond of her without having any brains; but when one goes to the same job against the grain," continued Nanni, reflecting on the difficulties he had experienced in his courtship of his cousin, "it's surprising how clever one must be to do it well!"

"As for my father," replied the Gobbo, letting the philosophy of love-making pass, as being a matter on which he had no experience of any value to offer, "he will of course feel, as everybody else will, that all the advantage is on our side in such a marriage. I wish it were less entirely so! We are but very poor folks, 'gnor Nanni; we have nothing to boast of, save indeed of an old name and a line of noble ancestors. You will at least give your children noble blood by one side of the house, Signor Palli!" said the Gobbo, dwelling with pleasure, excusably enough, on the one thing in the world he had to be proud of.

"Ay! To be sure! that's a fine thing. I must tell Babbo of that. You have lots of ancestors

then, Sandro mio, I suppose?" asked Nanni, meditatively.

"There are all their names written in the pedigree of the Boccanera family;" answered the Gobbo, pompously. "There are no great number; but I think I can remember them all in their order."

"Can you, though, indeed!" rejoined Nanni, devoutly hoping in his secret heart that his brother-in-law *in posse* would not begin to recite the bead-roll then and there. "I suppose, though," he added, after a minute's meditation, "I must have had ancestors too! I *know* I had a grandfather. For I can remember him now; and a fine old man he was; six foot in his stockings, if he was an inch! But may be a grandfather don't count! You don't think much of your grandfather, I reckon, in your family."

"My grandfather, rest his soul, was no great thing; only a poor working jeweller like my father."

And so Nanni remained in the humbled conviction, that grandfathers were useless in the way of ancestors.

"And now, *Caro mio*," said Nanni, as they came to the door of the Boccanera's house, "I'll tell you how it shall be. I'll wait here, and you shall go in and see how the land lies, and manage so that I can speak to Caterina alone. I've never right down asked her to be mine yet; and to tell you the honest truth, I am all of a quake at the thought of doing it. I had rather not come in at all, than not see her alone."

"I'll contrive it!" said the Gobbo; "never fear! I'll be back in a minute."

"You may have all the house to yourself, if you like," said he, returning almost immediately, "for Babbo has finished his morsel,—'tis but a morsel he

ever eats;—and is gone to take his cup of coffee at the café round the corner of the *mercato*. I will get my bit in the kitchen; and there is Caterina all alone in the room."

"Did you tell her anything? Did you say I was there?" asked Nanni, with much anxiety.

"Not a word! She fancies you are on the other side of the Consuma, and two to one she is thinking of you now."

Thus encouraged, Nanni ventured to enter, and stepping up the stairs as if he were a burglar dreadfully afraid of being heard, knocked at the door of the family sitting-room.

*Chi è!"** said a voice Nanni knew every note of right well, in answer to his knock; and added in the next instant, without waiting for any reply, "*Passi pure!**

And in the next instant Nanni stood in the only presence of which he felt the slightest fear. And nearly, not quite, the same might be said of Caterina.

She jumped from the chair on which she had been sitting near the window, engaged on some description of needlework, and hastily concealed the article on which she had been employed in the bosom of her dress, as girls invariably do when they have any small matter to hide at a short notice.

"Signor Nanni!" she cried, flushing up to the roots of her raven-black hair, "who would have dreamed of seeing you to-day!"

"May I come in, Caterina?" said Nanni, blushing

* "Who's there? Come in any way." "*Pure*" has an infinite number of shades of meaning; and may here be best perhaps rendered as in the text.

as hotly as she did, and much more embarrassed in his speech.

"I suppose that means, *Signore mio*, 'may I stay in,' for it is too late to ask, it seems to me, if you may come in."

"Well then, Caterina, may I stay in . . . . for a short time. I have come to speak to you."

"I am glad to hear that, at all events, 'gnor Nanni," said Caterina, with a sly demureness, "for the last time I had the pleasure of seeing you, if I remember right, you did not do much in the way of speaking at all."

"I had nothing to say then, Caterina," replied Nanni, with the utmost simplicity; "but this time I have."

Caterina's heart began at this point in the dialogue to beat with a force that communicated a movement to the bit of white muslin which covered her bosom sufficient to have betrayed secrets to a more practised and close observer than honest Nanni, who had quite enough to do to think just then of what he was saying and doing himself, without giving any part of his mind to watching others.

"But I do not know, Signor Nanni," said Caterina, looking down on the brick floor, on which she was busily tracing the lines of the bricks with the point of her foot, "I do not know, whether you may stay here . . . . long enough to say anything. For my father, you know, will be back from the café in a minute, and I do not know where Sandro is; but he will be here directly, and you know, Signor Nanni . . . ."

"Sandro is come in," said Nanni, "I came in with him. We have been having a walk together, and I came here with a message from him."

"A message from Sandro!" cried Caterina, her thoughts suddenly taking another turn. "Is there anything the matter? Why does he not come himself? Where is he?"

And so saying she was making for the door to call him, and Nanni saw that in another instant he would either have to say his say before Sandro, or to leave it unsaid.

Urged by the imminence of this danger, Nanni crossed the little room in a couple of strides, and placing himself with his back to the door, said,

"Caterina! will you not listen to me then!"

Then Caterina became quite sure that her first instinctive feeling had been the right one, and she knew very well what the nature of the "message" Nanni had to deliver was to be.

"But if Sandro gave you a message for me, 'gnor Nanni, I suppose there is nothing that he may not listen to," said she, hypocritically.

"Oh yes! he knows all about it, Sandro does. But it is to you only, Caterina . . . . I mean to say it is . . . . I only . . . . *don't* you know what it is I wish to say to you, Caterina?"

"Holy Virgin! How can I guess, *Signore mio?* A message from Sandro! Oh, I know,—that he is . . . . going to the Arena Goldoni* to-night, and that I must not expect him home to supper."

The little hypocrite! It was too bad. But cats *will* sport with mice before they eat them; and an angler would not thank you for a fish landed without any "play." But poor Nanni's matter-of-fact simplicity was too absolute to afford much sport.

* An open-air theatre at Florence.

"No, Signora, Sandro said nothing about the Arena Goldoni. It wasn't that."

"What can it have been then? I am sure I can't guess, 'gnor Nanni."

"Not if you were to think of the day up at Schifanoia, and the drive down the hill in the evening?" pleaded poor Nanni.

"Ah, what a pleasant day that was! I often think of it," shuffled his little tormentor.

"Well, then, I am sure, dearest Caterina, putting two and two together, you ought to be able to guess my errand here to-day."

"Putting *two* and *two* together!" repeated Caterina, with an emphasis upon the noun of number, which ought to have made Nanni's course clear before him. But though he had boasted that no brains were necessary to him for the carrying on of a conversation with his Caterina, he was now at a loss for the need of a small allowance of "that article," as he phrased it.

"Yes, when I say putting two and two together," he stammered, "I mean that what I said then should lead you to guess what it is I want to say now."

"If that is it, 'gnor Nanni, perhaps the best way would be to say over again what you said then. But I think I hear Sandro coming out of the kitchen."

Thus spurred, and rendered desperate by the irresistibly provocative prettiness of Caterina's *mignonne* figure, as she stood, still busily engaged in following the zigzag lines of the bricks on the floor with the point of a most exasperatingly pretty little foot, and shooting wickedly murderous glances from under the long lashes of her laughing black eyes, Nanni turned at bay.

"I forget what I said, but I know that, coming in at the gate at night, while uncle and the priest were talking to the *finanzilra** at the carriage window, that is what I did!" he cried suddenly, encircling her waist as he spoke with his arm, and imprinting a very thoroughly delivered kiss on her cheeks.

"For shame, Signor Nanni!" said Caterina, disengaging herself; "is that the way to . . . ."

"Yes, that is the way to ask you to let me do the same always, whenever I like, say once every ten minutes, and never to let anybody else do the same. Yes, that is the way to ask you to be my wife, Caterina; for, *per Bacco*, I don't know any better!"

"And is that the message you had to bring me from Sandro, 'gnor Nanni?"

"Any way," said Nanni, looking rather shamefaced, "he knew that was what I was come to say to you."

"And did he approve of your intention of saying it?"

"Yes, he did. You may ask him all about it. We had a long talk, Sandro and I. Oh, Caterina, *Caterina mia!* if you will only approve too, it is all right."

"And your father, Signor Carlo, Nanni, and your uncle, what will they say?"

"But what do you say? I will answer for the rest. My father and I understand each other. What do you say, Caterina?"

"Why, *Signore mio*, if they all agreed, it would not become me to stand out and say no."

* The *Octroi* men at the city gate, who have to be satisfied that the carriage contains nothing liable to octroi before it can enter the city.

"Then you say, yes? But say it, dearest, with your own sweet lips!"

"Mind, Nanni," said Caterina, in a grave manner, "I said *if* all the others were agreed."

"Well, so be it. If my father and yours consent, you will not say no?"

"No," said Caterina, laughing; "will that do?"

"No; say yes, if it's only to show that you can say yes!" replied Nanni, who had by this time recovered the use of brains sufficient for the occasion, and who had got his great strong arm again round Caterina's lithe little waist. "Say yes!" he repeated, as not seeking this time to escape from his arm, she held up her face towards his with lips tightly closed, as if to refuse the utterance of the desired word. That was certainly the meaning of their position; but it did also give them very much the appearance of inviting a kiss. Nanni bent his face slowly and gradually towards them. "Say yes!" he repeated, giving her a little shake with the arm which was round her waist, and still bringing his lips nearer to hers. "Say it!" and when there was not above half an inch of distance remaining between them, so that the breath of the required monosyllable was more felt than the sound heard, the "yes" was uttered, and the deed instantaneously sealed and delivered in due form.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CANON OF SAN LORENZO ON BUSINESS AT HOME AND AT ROME.

THE collegiate chapter of San Lorenzo was proud of its decidedly distinguished member the Rev. Canon Guido Guidi. He was well known to be a rising man. In the first place, gentlemen were rare—and are still rarer now, than they were in the early years of this century,—in the ranks of the Tuscan church. And the Rev. Guido Guidi was undeniably a gentleman, by birth, by connection, by culture, manners, and outward semblance. And the church generally made the most of its few aristocratic members. They were used as the show specimens of the establishment, and were put accordingly in the most conspicuous places. The chapter of San Lorenzo, once a very aristocratic foundation, with princes on its rolls in the palmy days of church and state, was well aware that in its present humbled condition it counted no man in its ranks who could be compared to the Rev. Canon Guidi as a show priest; and it made much of him, and founded hopes upon him accordingly. In the next place, the gentlemanlike canon was what was a still rarer phenomenon in the church of Tuscany, and rarest of all when found in

combination with the other advantages which have been rehearsed, a man of learning, attainments, and literary tastes and habits. No wonder that such a man should be marked out for honours and advancement. There was no knowing how important might be the lustre which would probably be reflected by such a member on the chapter. A red hat was by no means the utmost point to which such a man as the Canon Guidi, so placed, might reasonably aspire. He had already obtained distinction as the author of one or two small works on professional subjects, which had been very favourably noticed at Rome. And it was known that he was now engaged on a learned work on the interesting topic of the reserved cases of the confessional, from which much was expected.

When, therefore, in the course of November in the year in which the circumstances here narrated took place, the Canon made known to his colleagues of the chapter that certain inquiries and researches necessary to the prosecution of the work on which he was engaged made a journey to Rome indispensable to him, every facility was at once accorded him for the purpose.

In the course of the month or thereabouts, which had elapsed since the date of that visit to the third floor of Palazzo Lunardi, a detailed account of which has been given, and which, as it will be remembered, had left Marietta in so painful a state of nervous excitement and mental struggle, the Canon had frequently repeated his visits. He never failed to make minute inquiries after the state of the old Canon's health, observing that it was generally at the full of the year that persons in extreme old age

were observed to fail,—that the end of a life so prolonged was usually painless,—more like the quiet extinction of a lamp in which all the oil has been consumed, than any forcible disruption of the body and soul;—and that the most perfect apparent health was not, at such an age as that of the Canon Lunardi, to be trusted to as any guarantee for prolonged existence, as one of the usual circumstances of death in extreme old age was apt to be its suddenness. He did not upon any of these occasions enter again formally on the subject of his last conversation with Marietta; but he was careful ever to keep before her eyes the rapid lapse of the time of grace which remained before the sale of the palace was to be effected, and consequently the hope of her life accomplished or frustrated for ever; and thus he provided that the fever of her mind should be constantly fed by fresh fuel, and that the usual effect of a protracted struggle between principle and the desire for any object longed for with an intensity almost touching monomania, should do its work on her soul. In such cases, as Canon Guidi well knew, principle is rarely victorious, unless the victory has been snatched by a *coup-de-main* early in the fight.

Often, during that supremely miserable time, had the unhappy woman feared that reason, which held the balance in her mind with so uncertain and vacillating a tenure, would wholly fail her. Often, during her long vigils in the chapel, where she would pass hours of the night, would she fancy that the effigies of the dead around her upbraided her for her culpable and cowardly weakness in shrinking from the accomplishment of the duty to which she had vowed her life. She would humble her spirit in the

dust for having dared to oppose her ignorance and the blind instincts of her heart to the superior knowledge of so tried a friend and so competent an adviser as the Canon of San Lorenzo. She would return to her tear-steeped pillow, determined to conquer the weak nature within her,—to be true to her trust, to her blood, and to her vow. She would resolve at Guidi's next visit to put herself entirely in his hands, and walk blindly by his guidance towards the sacred end she had proposed to herself. And as often, when she rose fevered, unrested, from her bed in the morning, and had to meet her uncle, receive his affectionate and cheery greeting, say words of affection, far from unfelt, in return, and do her daily ministerings to his well-being and comfort, she hated herself with a loathing of the night thoughts that had dominated her soul during the hours of their ascendency, and poured out her whole heart in supplications to be delivered from the possession of them.

The fearful struggle had worn her to a shadow. Her tall and spare but finely formed and commanding figure began to stoop a little at the shoulders. The rich black tresses, which still made admirable contrast with the marble whiteness of her pure and clear, but bloodless complexion, were more noticedly touched with silver-gray lights on the surface of the large bands in which she wore them,—wonderfully so, considering the shortness of the time in which the change had been operated! The mild and melancholy expression which had been habitual in her large, dark, liquid eyes, was now rarely to be seen there. It was changed for the fitful lustre of fever, marking alike the nervous restlessness of the

mind, and the ravages made by its struggles on the body.

There were few to mark these changes; for the intercourse with the Palli family had almost wholly ceased of late. Sebastian, poor fellow, was too much occupied with his racking anxieties and sorrows, and with his labour on the forthcoming opera on which he had staked so much, to be watchful of the changes in a face seen daily and hourly. And the Canon, though he did at times gaze wistfully into her face, when it chanced that the light so fell upon it as to make it visible to him, was past the time when the failing faculties of all kinds take much heed of those changes in another to which they are so blind in themselves. The Canon Guidi saw the daily increasing alteration in Marietta, and understood all the significance of it;—saw it with a passing sigh of regret, that *that* sacrifice also should be necessary for the straight and unbending treading of the path on which he had to walk; but knowing his own purpose, and comprehending the means by which it might be advanced, saw it with approval.

One day, in the course of these visits to Palazzo Lunardi, the Canon Guidi found occasion to speak with Sebastian in Marietta's absence. Gently and kindly reminding the young man of the conversation they had had together some weeks before in the Piazza del Duomo, he asked him if he had come to any determination on the subject. The young composer replied with perfect frankness, that the more he had reflected on all the Canon had said to him, the more he had been forced to admit to himself the entire truth of all he had urged;—that nevertheless the step proposed was one that he

would fain avoid if possible, if only from the fact, that it was an irrevocable one;—and, that he had made up his mind to give himself the chance of success in the work on which he was now engaged. He was not altogether without hope that he had done something better than he had before achieved. He had put his whole heart into the work, had laboured conscientiously;—if he were rewarded with any measure of success, he proposed still to seek for independence and a maintenance for himself and Marietta from his profession;—if he failed, he would then be ready to admit that the game was over for him, and would avail himself with deeply felt gratitude of the Canon's kindly proposed plan.

And Guidi did not by any word seek to dissuade him from his determination. On the contrary, he acquiesced in it with apparent approval.

"The appointment," he said, "is not to be filled up till towards the end of Carnival; and by that time you will probably know how you stand. When is your opera to be brought out? I wish I could do anything to contribute to its success. But that is a world, you know," he added, with a smile, "beyond the ken of the cassock. There I am powerless. Should you change that world for another, I may be able to help you,—not only at starting. When is it to come off, and where?"

Sebastian named one of the small theatres, of which there are so many in the spectacle-loving City of Flowers; and said that the *impresario* had promised to bring his opera out at the beginning of Carnival.

"That will do excellently well!" rejoined the priest. "You will then know your fate in time to

decide on my proposal. I heartily wish that your opera may have all the success you wish, *because* you wish it, my dear boy. And, after all, one can only wish a man to be happy according to his own notions. Otherwise, I should say I wish you might fail; for I am very sure the career I am proposing to you is, under all the circumstances of your case, the better one.—*A rivederla!*"

It was a few days only after this conversation that the Canon was to start for Rome. On the evening of the day before his departure, as he was busy in his study making his preparations for his journey, aided by his "*governante*" Assunta, there came a ring at the Canon's door.

"Go, and see who it is, Assunta;" said the Canon; "I expect a Signor Gualandi; if it is he, show him in. If it is any one else, I am not at home."

And a minute afterwards Signor Francesco Gualandi, a stout, florid little man, whose appearance was rather of the shabby genteel order, walked into the Canon's cosy room, making a very low obeisance as he entered.

"Good evening, Signore!" said the dignified ecclesiastic, returning the salutation with the easy courtesy of an affable superior; "pray do me the favour to take a chair. You find me in the hurry incidental to a somewhat sudden departure for Rome;—a call on business, which will not detain me long, I hope."

"If your reverence would prefer to put off my little affair . . . ."

"Oh! no! I can spare you the minutes which will suffice to say the few words that are needed.—Shut the door, Assunta, and do not let us be disturbed. I requested you to call upon me, Signore, because I

wished to tell you, before leaving Florence, that I have, I think, succeeded in smoothing over for the time your little difficulty."

"Oh! your Reverence is too condescendingly kind! How can I ever thank your Reverence sufficiently!"

"No thanks at all are due or needed, Signor Gualandi," returned the Canon, somewhat loftily. "I have acted as appeared to me right and just; and I trust that you will be careful in future to justify my intercession."

"Doubt it not, your Reverence! doubt it not. It has ever been my endeavour . . . ."

"I believe so. When I spoke with you first, at the request of my friend the Curate of Sant' Ambrogio, I was struck by the right feeling you expressed on the subject, and was thence induced to see the minister in your behalf."

"Ah! your Reverence has the gift of reading a man's heart!"

"It is a faculty gained, as others are, by practice, my good friend. Now the matter stands thus, Signor Gualandi," continued the Canon, rising from his chair and standing with his back to the comfortable wood fire, which was blazing on the low hearth, while his visitor sat with his hat in both hands on the edge of his chair at some three or four yards' distance;

"You have been *impresario* of the theatre you now hold for a short time only, I believe?"

"Only for two seasons, your Reverence."

"And your relations, as I understand, with the authorities have been always heretofore satisfactory?"

"Never a word, your Reverence . . . ."

"And you have no idea who has thought it his

auty to make the representations to the minister which have caused your present difficulty?"

"I know no more than your Reverence does who it could have been!" said the little man, throwing up his eyes and hands, with the hat still in them, to attest the verity of his assertion. And in doing so he missed the smile which passed over the priest's handsome face as he made the comparison. Had he observed it ever so acutely, however, he would never have guessed that it was caused by the fact that his Reverence was perfectly well informed of the whole matter. For the truth was, that an anonymous complaint of the tendency of certain representations at Signor Gualandi's theatre had been made by his own parish priest, the Curate of Sant' Ambrogio, who had subsequently offered to procure for him the favorable intercession of the Canon of San Lorenzo; and who had done both these things at the request of the Reverend Canon himself.

"No matter!" continued the latter; "I have examined the pieces, which seem to have given some scandal. And perhaps there are some expressions in them which might have been better avoided. You see, Signor Gualandi, a very lamentable degree of freedom, and much irreverence for things and personages to whom reverence is due, prevailed under the political system which has happily come to an end;—a relaxation in your theatrical world, as in all else. Now it is the highly laudable desire of our present legitimate rulers to correct all this, and restore as quickly as possible the tone of the public mind in such matters. These things are watched, and very rightly, by jealous eyes at present; and I am not surprised that some well-meaning person has

deemed it his duty to call the attention of the authorities to the passages I have alluded to. However, I so spoke to the minister, who was good enough to attribute considerable weight to my opinion on the subject, that no further inconvenience will follow from the complaint which has been made. Be circumspect and careful for the future, and you will hear no more of the matter."

"Your Reverence may depend on me to exercise the utmost vigilance; I can assure your Reverence . ."

"Good. I doubt not you will be prudent. And now I think I need not detain you any longer. Good evening."

"*Levo l' incommodo,** *Riverenza!*" said the *impresario*, rising. "I would that I knew how to thank your Reverence."

"As I have said, Signore, no thanks are necessary. I wish you good evening."

And Signor Gualandi bowed himself back to the door, which he was on the point of closing behind him, when the Canon said suddenly,

"Oh, Signor Gualandi! By-the-bye, it strikes me that there *is* a matter in which you might be useful to me,—or rather indeed not to me, for it is no affair of mine, but to certain personages with whom it is good for you to stand well. You understand me?"

"*Mio padrone! padronissimo!* Anything in my power I am sure I should be too happy."

"It has just occurred to me that it is at your theatre, if I mistake not, that an opera is to be brought out next Carnival by a young man, a certain Signor"—(and here the Canon referred to a paper

* Literally, "I remove the inconvenience;" a common phrase of leave-taking in Tuscany, especially from an inferior to a superior.

which he took from a rack on the mantel-shelf),—"a certain Signor Sebastiano de' Lunardi. Is it not so?"

"Your Reverence has been rightly informed. I have made such an arrangement with the gentleman your Reverence refers to. I do not think there can be anything objectionable in the work proposed; but I need hardly say, your Reverence, that if . . . ."

"That is not the point in question in this case, Signor Gualandi. It is this. There are reasons why it is wished that the young gentleman in question, who, as I am informed, and as you, perhaps, are aware, belongs to a noble and ancient family, though one now impoverished,—there are reasons, I say, that make it desirable that this young man should not enter on the career which he proposes to himself. I need not tell a man of your experience of the world, Signor Gualandi, that young men are often apt to take steps in the outset of life which it is sometimes very difficult for their friends to prevent, but which, nevertheless, their best advisers would fain dissuade them from. Doubtless you are aware that, since the happy restoration of order and legitimate rule in this country, it has been very wisely a great object with the government to foster and uphold as far as possible the old noble families of Florence; and . . . ."

"*Basta! Ho capito!*"* cried the *impresario*, delighted at having it in his power to do anything agreeable to "the authoritities." "*Basta!* Signor de' Lunardi shall put no opera on my boards; that your Reverence may rest assured of."

"Nay, Signor Impresario," rejoined the priest; "that is not exactly what is wished. A refusal on

* "Enough! I understand."

your part to accept this work would only lead to new attempts to produce it elsewhere, very likely under auspices less respectable than yours. And the matter would thus be rendered worse, instead of mended. No; it is necessary to disgust the young gentleman with the career which he proposes to himself, and which he doubtless thinks is one all of roses and laurels. You could tell him a different story, eh, Signor Gualandi? But he will believe no such story. Young men must buy their own experience! No; what is desired by those whom you would wish to oblige is that the work should be produced, and should meet with egregious failure,—you understand me? A thorough *fiasco** would cure the youth of his ill-advised ambition, and send him to some career which his friends might see him adopt with pleasure. Do you see?"

"Perfectly, your Reverence, perfectly! and your Reverence is no doubt right in your observations," replied the *impresario*, with a rather rueful and blank expression of countenance. "And certainly it would be very easy to afford the young gentleman the salutary lesson you speak of. But it is rather a hard thing to . . . ."

"Well, well, say no more, Signor Gualandi. The business, as I said, is none of mine. I will report to persons interested in this young man that you decline to aid them in this matter."

"Not so, not so, your Reverence! I entreat your Reverence neither to think nor to say anything of the sort. I was only about to venture the remark that such a measure would be attended with some little

* A cant phrase for a break-down, or failure.

loss of credit, and a more considerable sacrifice of money. I think little of the first. We are used to such mishaps; and we can curry favour with the public rather than otherwise by immediately withdrawing the piece disapproved of. But put it on the boards how we will, a loss of money there must be. And, I confess . . . ."

"Oh, as far as that goes, I have no doubt that I could arrange that you should be indemnified for any such loss. Of course there can be no wish that you should be victimised in the matter."

"I am distressed beyond measure, Signor Canonico, that my circumstances should compel me to advert to that aspect of the matter," said the *impresario*, well pleased at the prospect of being able to turn a penny by the *fiasco*, which might very possibly have occurred at his own cost, if things had been left to themselves; "but your Reverence is very good to take my position into consideration in this respect. *Lasci fare a me!** Trust to Francesco Gualandi to prepare as complete a *fiasco nelle regole* † as ever an unlucky composer had. I shall be happy to contribute to the young gentleman's cure, and glad to be the means of sending him to some better trade than ours."

"That is all, then, that need be said on the subject. You may be assured that your compliance will not be forgotten in certain quarters. Of course I need hardly caution you that no word of this conversation should ever reach any other ears. Were it otherwise, inconveniences might follow which I should regret to have exposed you to."

* "Leave me alone to manage it."

† Literally "in the rules," *i.e.*, a regular, thorough failure.

"*A chi lo dite! Riverenza! Non dubiti, nò!*" * said the *impresario*, putting one dirty forefinger to the side of his rubicund nose.

"Good evening, then, Signor Gualandi. We have perfectly understood each other."

"I have the honour to wish your Reverence a very good evening and a prosperous journey!" returned Signor Gualandi, bowing himself out. And this time he was not recalled; the real object of the fictitious complaint against the *impresario* and of his interview with the Canon having been thus achieved.

"Ten to one," muttered the Canon to himself, as the door closed on his visitor, "that I might have safely left the result of my young friend's music to its own merits. But when a little diplomacy may make a probability into a certainty, it is wise to throw no chance away. So now, my friend Sebastian, I think we may bespeak a cassock and three-cornered hat for you. And what could I have done better for the lad," mused the priest, "if I had had no motive save his own welfare?"

On the evening of the third day, after the date of the above conversation, the wretched, ill-contrived wooden box, which called itself the diligence from Florence to Rome, with its six miserable, under-sized horses, its rope harness and mud-bedraggled exterior, interior, conductor, postilion, and passengers, jolted through the filthy ill-paved streets of Rome, after having duly undergone its hour or hour and a-half of purgatory at the gate, while the resigned and patient, but miserable and over-tired passengers

* "To whom do you say it? Let your Reverence have no doubt about it, none." "*A chi lo dite*" means, "Am I a man to whom such a caution is necessary?"

opened their trunks and packages scattered about in the mud of the road, and bribed the officials of the gate to spare them yet worse treatment. Wearily, lamely, fecklessly, incapably, but with unceasing salvoes of whip-cracking, which expressed the postilions' triumphant sense of the feat they had performed in arriving at all, the wretched vehicle was dragged at a slow walk to the vast folding gates of the "Privileged Pontifical Diligence Office," and swallowed up by the cavernous archway, while the heavy doors were closed behind it; here more delay, more searching, more bullying, more bribing, more torment of all sorts were in store for the unfortunate travellers, who were pounced on as they descended from the vehicle by the cocked-hatted officials of the priest-king's gendarmerie.

But a sudden and remarkable change of manner came over those grim warriors when a gold-buckled shoe, followed by a well-proportioned black silk stockinged leg was seen putting itself forth from the murky interior of the conveyance. Off went the cocked hats, while an obsequious arm was held at either side to assist one of the privileged and dominant caste to alight; and the Canon of San Lorenzo,—his outward man somewhat the worse for his journey, but still looking a dignified priest in every inch of him,—affably availing himself of the proffered aid, stepped gracefully forth, and passing unquestioned between the saluting soldiers, spoke a word or two to their superior officer, who came forward with a bow to meet him, and was very speedily assisted together with his belongings to a hack-carriage, and forwarded to his destination; the gendarmes, custom-house officers, postilions, porters,

and non-descript loiterers bowing profoundly as he drove off, and then returning leisurely to perform their office upon the envious lay victims who were left behind.

The more fortunate Canon's fiacre took him to a small house in the neighbourhood of the Sapienza, which was the home of a reverend professor in that celebrated university, busied then, as now, in teaching that the sun moves round the earth, as proved by the miracle of Joshua among other evidences of the same truth, despite the opinion adopted by some people to the contrary. The Reverend Marco Brizzini was an old friend and college mate of the Canon of San Lorenzo, and hospitably made his house the Florentine priest's home during his stay in the Eternal City.

"How long a spell do you propose to give us, this time, Guido?" asked his friend, after the first greetings had passed between them.

"I hope not more than a couple of days, Marco. I have urgent need to be at home again as soon as may be."

"Why, Guido, one would think that you had all the business of the Sacred College on your shoulders; you are always in such a hurry."

"In fact, my friend, I have just at present many things to think of, besides my little work, which I am anxious to have in the press by the end of the year. My business here has been prepared for me; and I shall only need to have a little conversation with my learned friend the Superior of the Jesuits. He expects me to wait on him to-morrow."

And so after a social supper, and a little chat, the over-tired Canon went to his bed.

The next morning early, after making a careful toilette, he sallied forth alone and on foot; and instead of proceeding at once to the House of the Jesuits, as might have been expected from what he had said to his friend the professor, took his way towards that remote part of the city in the neighbourhood of the Temple of Vesta, and of the house which is pointed out as that one inhabited by Rienzi. Walking forwards from the latter towards the former of these buildings, as a person would in continuance of their way from the centre of the city, the Canon's eye soon lighted on the figure of a man standing with his back turned towards him, and his hands clasped behind him, gazing apparently at the beautiful little building called the Temple of Vesta. Pursuing his walk in such a direction as to keep him exactly behind this individual, he approached till he stood not more than a yard behind his back. Still the man continued gazing at the Temple of Vesta, with his hands behind his back, and neither turned round or moved.

"Will it be a fine day, sir?" said the Canon, standing immediately behind the stranger. But the latter did not reply or move a limb.

"Will it be fine out of doors, to-day, sir?" asked the Canon again, with the same result.

"Will it be fine indoors?" he repeated, in the same quiet tone. And then the man still, without answering a word, or turning his head, began to walk leisurely forward; and the Canon, appearing to take no further special notice of him, followed him at a little distance.

The stranger soon turned towards the right, taking

a direction away from the Tiber, and after a long walk, during the course of which he had never once turned his head, paused before the door of a small low building in the road leading from the Lateran to Santa Maria Maggiore. There, still without turning his head, he thrust out one arm, and pointed to the door; and, having stood thus a few seconds, pursued his walk.

The Canon stood still until his conductor, whose face he had never seen, and who had never seen him, was out of sight in the distance, and then stepped up to the door which had been indicated to him, and knocked at it three distinct knocks. At the third it was opened by the pulling of a cord, and the priest entered and carefully closed it after him.

The whole of the small space on the ground-floor of the little building was occupied by a narrow stair and one room. A single glance was sufficient to show that there was no human being in that part of the house. There was in fact nothing whatsoever in the room; and the bare stone walls showed clearly that nobody could be concealed there. The Canon, after assuring himself of this at a glance, proceeded to mount the stairs, which brought him to another room on the first floor. And it was plain that these two rooms and the stair constituted the whole of the building.

The upstairs room was as entirely empty and unfurnished as that below. But at the side of it, furthest from the one window, which was partially boarded up, so as to make the light in the chamber very dim and imperfect, a portion of the space was divided off by a wooden partition; and in this partition there was a small shelf, like that used by the

cash-takers at a theatre, and above it an aperture just large enough for a hand to pass.

"Two, seven, nineteen," said the Canon, advancing into the chamber.

"Right!" said a voice from behind the screen, and then added, "Five, nine, twelve."

"Right," replied the Canon.

"Pay the fee!" said the voice, and the Canon drew from his pocket two hundred dollars in gold, and placed the coin on the little shelf. An old and wrinkled hand was put forth through the aperture, and the money was taken in; and apparently counted, for in a minute or two the voice again repeated "Right!" and then, saying "*Ecco la roba!*"* the hand placed on the shelf a small packet neatly wrapped in white paper.

The Canon took it, and after looking at it for a moment with an earnest glance, put it into an inside breast-pocket, and then uttered the single word. "Directions."

"One packet weekly to produce the effect desired in two months."

"Good!" said the priest, and proceeding to leave the house as he had entered it, he followed the road to Santa Maria Maggiore, and soon returned to the inhabited part of the city.

The other matters with which the Reverend Guido Guidi occupied his two days at Rome need not detain us. He did visit the Superior of the Jesuits, and did consult him about some points to be treated in the work on "Reserved Cases." He saw sundry other personages of more or less weight and eminence

* "Here are the goods."

in the Church, and left on the mind of every one of them the impression that the well-bred and distinguished Canonico of San Lorenzo was a man fitted to rise to the higher spheres of the hierarchy.

And on the evening of the eighth day from that on which he had left Florence, the Canon entered his study again, and the first thing he did was to transfer the white-paper packet from his breast pocket to a secret drawer, in a little cabinet, of which the key was fastened by a gold chain around his neck.

CHAPTER V.

NANNI TURNED CONFESSOR.

WHEN Nanni had returned to the Pappagallo, after the triumphant conclusion of the decisive visit to his mistress, related in a former chapter, he had found his father in a state of extreme irritation against his brother. He was determined to return to the Casentino the next day. Nanni had intended to remain for a few weeks in Florence. But when he broached this scheme to his father, the *Fattore* had insisted on the necessity of his son's being at home for the vintage. And Nanni could not deny that it was the very last time of the year at which he ought to be from home.

"Nay! *figlio mio!*" said he, "go thou home with me to-morrow, and help me see to the vintaging; and as soon as ever the wine is in the vats, thou shalt come up for a spell at Florence, and go a-courting to thy heart's content. For I know that is what thou'rt after."

"Very well, *padre mio;* so be it! And to tell you the truth, after I had had a talk with my cousin Laura this morning . . . . ."

"Tell me naught of thy cousin Laura! I want to hear nothing more of any of the lot of them. I tell

thee, Nanni, thou shouldst not marry thy cousin, not with my consent, if she and her father were to come a-begging for thee on their knees!"

"Why, what's gone wrong with my uncle, Babbo? As for Laura, I'll go bail she has neither said nor done anything she shouldn't."

"You don't mean to say," cried his father, turning sharply round upon him, "that you intend to run that contrariwise as to be making up to Laura just when my mind is off it?"

"Not I, Babbo. There is no love-making between Laura and me, and never will be. But she is a good girl, and a good cousin for all that. But what is wrong, I say, with uncle?"

"Why, they have swindled us out of our share of the old Palazzo!"

"What, old Palazzo?" asked Nanni, innocently.

"*Cospetto! the* palace, Palazzo Lunardi, to be sure. When Parini is sold up, the palace must go of course, and it ought to have been between us by all right and justice! We're swindled! that is all, *figlio mio!*"

"And will uncle Giuseppe have the palace? Has he bought it out and out, or only lent money on it?"

"He has lent money on it, on the understanding that it is to be unconditionally his, without any putting up to sale, if the money is not paid by the end of Carnival. Oh! he is sure of it enough, never fear!"

"Then, if Laura . . . . ." marries Sebastian, Nanni was going to say, the palace will go back to its old owners once more. But he checked himself, and only thought it, instead of saying it.

This conversation had taken place on the afternoon of that October day on which the *Fattore* and his son had reached Florence. On the following morning they started on their return to the Casentino. But the farmer was as good as his word; and as soon as ever the work of the vintage was over, he made no difficulty in allowing Nanni to come to Florence for a few weeks, exhorting him only not to go near his uncle. And Nanni had come up for his holiday much about the time of the Canon Guidi's return from Rome.

This time, immediately on arriving, his first visit, as may be imagined, was to Caterina; and they arranged with the Gobbo that they should go all three to hear an opera, which was then making a *furore*, at the same theatre, as it chanced, at which Sebastian's work was to be brought out.

Nanni had passed nearly the whole afternoon with his love, finding no difficulty now in talking from one hour's end to another. But about six o' clock, knowing that his uncle would by that time have gone back to the Ponte Vecchio after his dinner, he ran off to pay a visit to Laura, promising to return in time to go with Caterina and the Gobbo to the theatre at eight.

Laura was sitting at her drawing-table as usual; but her pencils were lying idle, and she sate with her chin leaning on her hand in an attitude of listless reverie, very unlike her usual habits.

"Oh! Nanni! I am so glad to see you! I am so glad you have come to Florence. How long are you here for?"

"Well! I mean to take a spell of holiday. Babbo

don't want me just now. I dare say I shall stay here till Carnival, and a bit beyond."

"Bravo! I shall be so glad to have you near me, Nanni."

To tell the honest truth, poor Nanni, on hearing the warmth with which his cousin spoke, was for a passing moment troubled with a doubt whether she were going to be so false to him as to bring their intercourse back again into the phase of love-making. But he quickly dismissed an idea so injurious to his cousin's loyalty.

"Why! Is there any way I can be useful to you, Laura?" he asked simply.

"Nothing, especially at the present moment, that I know of, dear Nanni; but it will be a comfort to be able to speak to you now and then. I have nobody whom I can speak to of the things that my heart is full of. And somehow or other I have been dispirited of late. Yet I often tell myself that matters are looking better on the whole, instead of worse. But I am anxious about Sebastian. I never see him now; and I know that he has need of encouragement. He will be losing all heart and courage, I fear."

"We are all at sixes and sevens, it seems!" returned Nanni, trying to look more serious than was his wont. "Even you and I can't well see each other as freely as we might wish. My father gave me only one charge when I came away, and that was not to have anything to say to my uncle; and I dare say that he would not be overpleased to see too much of me."

"Nay, I don't think that, Nanni. But I feared, from a few words my father said, that he had had a

quarrel with your father. He never says much; and I have no idea what it is that has gone wrong between them."

"But I have, though. My father is not much of a one to keep secrets; and out it all came as soon as ever I saw him. He was as angry as ever I saw him about anything!"

"And what was it about, for heaven's sake;—not about you and me?"

"No, thank goodness! As far as I understand it, the matter was this: It seems that the Marchese Perini has mortgaged the palace to my uncle to its full value; and that somehow or other my father supposed that he was to be for half in the affair. But my uncle has kept it all for himself. And no doubt it was Palazzo Lunardi he meant when he spoke to you about having bought a house for you to be mistress of."

"I to be mistress of Palazzo Lunardi! Oh, Nanni!"

"You may depend upon it that is it. And don't you see, Laura, as long as they thought that you and I were going to be one, it was all very well; the palace would have been between us like. But so soon as they began to find out that that wouldn't do, then each began to want the old house for himself. And no doubt, when you told your father that you would none of me, he took steps to secure the house. That, I take it, has been the story of the matter."

"Well, Nanni, it isn't I," said Laura, with a sigh, and putting her slender little hand into Nanni's broad brown palm as she spoke, "it isn't I who have had any part in preventing the house from becoming yours some day. I wonder whether Caterina," she

added, while a smile succeeded the cloud on her face, after her own April-day fashion, "will owe me a grudge for standing betwen her and the mistress-ship of Palazzo Lunardi?"

"Oh, Laura, how can you talk in that way!" said matter-of-fact Nanni. "You don't know Caterina. She jealous of you, or wanting anything that is yours! I tell you this," continued he, with a sound in his throat as if he were swallowing a very big pill, while his great clear brown eyes filled with moisture, "there does not exist a more unselfish, a more generous-hearted . . . ." and poor Nanni became, probably for the first time in his life, somewhat long-winded in his eloquence.

"Dear Nanni, I know it all! Bless your dear, simple heart, I was only jesting. But think of me coming to be owner of Palazzo Lunardi!"

"Well, I *have* thought of it," returned Nanni; "and this is what I have thought, Laura: that it would be funny enough, and pleasant enough, if it was to come to pass that there should be no need of changing the old name at all; if Palazzo Lunardi were to be Palazzo Lunardi in good earnest once again, eh?"

"I see your meaning, dear cousin. And yet do you know, Nanni, one of my troubles is that a marriage between Sebastian and me would be as unacceptable to his family as to my father."

"*O Bello!*"* exclaimed Nanni, "why, when the old Canon is gone, they won't have bread to eat!"

"Nonsense, Nanni! Don't talk in that way! As if Sebastian was not sure to make his way to a far superior position to any we can boast of!"

* Equivalent to "that's a good one!" an exclamation expressing surprise and dissent.

"But whom do you mean by his family? There is only the old Canon, who can't count for much, and his cousin the Signora Marietta."

"And it is just that cousin Signora Marietta that I am afraid of. The old Canon, dear old man, would wish nothing but to see his nephew and everybody else in the world happy. But the Contessa Marietta is a terrible woman. You know, Nanni, that I am not given to be overmuch afraid of people in general. Well, I am afraid of the Contessa Marietta. Somehow or other she makes me feel as if I were a little school-girl, and a very naughty one too, whenever I am in her presence. You may talk about bread to eat; but if she had neither rag to clothe her, nor morsel to keep body and soul together, trust me the Contessa de' Lunardi, as she calls herself, would not be one bit less proud or less unbending than if she were crowned and on a throne."

"Poor thing!" said Nanni. "There's some at Bonifazio,* they tell me, that *do* crown themselves with straws and rubbish."

"And yet the old Canon loves her; and Sebastian loves her well. But he has such a large and gentle heart, that he would love any one that entered into his daily life! I can tell you, Nanni, in my turn, that you do not know Sebastian."

"Not much! But I mean to know him better. But you don't mean to say, Laura, that he would wait for the consent of that poor mad woman, his cousin? I don't intend to wait for any consent of my uncle, or cousin either, Laura, I can tell you."

"You are very brave now, *amico mio!*" said

* The Tuscan Bethlehem Hospital.

Laura, with an arch smile; "but it seems to me that you wanted more than a cousin's consent, you wanted a little of her help to put you in a position to be so bold! But jesting apart, Nanni, I do not suppose that Sebastian would consider his cousin's consent indispensable; nor should I. But still the fact is, that that melancholy-eyed, never-smiling Contessa Marietta does exercise a powerful influence over both Sebastian and the old Canon."

"Well, it is very odd. I am not apt to feel much *soggezione* * with most people; but to tell the truth, the few times that I have been in company with the Signora Marietta, I have not felt as if I could speak to her as I could to other people. I felt afraid of her in a sort of a way—I think it is because she is mad. I have heard folk say they have felt the same thing when they went to see the poor souls at Bonifazio."

"But all this time you have told me nothing about your visit to Caterina. I have been too selfishly thinking of my affairs all the while. I guess, from the way you speak of her, that you did not find her too cruel."

"She is a deal too good for me, Laura; that is all I can say about it."

"Don't you remember, when we last parted, you were going to see her, and had made up your mind to speak to her brother? And then you went off to the Casentino in such a hurry that I never heard the result. Now tell me all about it. Did you see the Gobbo?"

* The feeling of being overawed or repressed by the presence of any one. The phrase is constantly in the mouth of the Tuscans.

"Yes! I took your advice, and told him all about it."

"And you found him, as I said, a man of sense and a very good-hearted fellow?"

"I think so. He's a man of so much sense that I could not understand half he said. And then he's such a fellow for talk! He goes on just like a book, and would never stop at all, if you'd let him, it's my belief. But I like the Gobbo for all that."

"At all events you understood each other?"

"He understood me; and that was what was mainly needed."

"And *he* had no objection, I suppose, to having you for a brother-in-law."

"Faith! but he had though, lots of objections. He wanted father's consent, and uncle's consent, and . . . . but what he wanted most of all was your consent. That is, he wanted to be sure,—to know that there was nothing between you and me."

"I hope you gave him my consent!"

"I did! I told him that you would not have me at a gift; and that I did not think of you, seeing that my mind was elsewhere. And then he wanted to find out whether you had any other in your eye. Oh! he is terrible for wanting to know all about everything, the Gobbo is. But I told him I was come there to tell my own secrets, and not to talk about other people's."

"Thanks, dear Nanni, for your discretion. But, do you know, I think it would not be a bad plan to take the Gobbo into my confidence. I have a great idea of his head; and I am sure he is to be trusted."

"Well! I think it would be a good move. We parted the best of friends, the Gobbo and I. And

then, bless you, he has got ancestors too, it seems, like your *damo;* * and understands all that sort of thing. I spoke of grandfather, thinking to make the family look as respectable as I could. But, lord love you, they don't think anything of grandfathers in those old families. Seems they don't count for ancestors!"

"But what did you do with Caterina herself, Nanni! Come now, tell me all about it."

"Ah!" replied Nanni, taking a very long breath; "that was a very different sort of a job from talking to the Gobbo; *altro!* Anybody might have talked to him, that could understand what he was driving at;" added he, leaving it to be inferred that it was not every man who could have brought the other interview to a successful termination.

"But tell me how you did it, Nanni; come now," said Laura, coaxingly.

"Well, I *did* it! I screwed it out of her; though she held very hard! But it is no manner of use telling any one how you did it. For it is one of those things you see that can't be done by rule. I have read books on purpose, that tell you how to do it. But I might as well have saved my money and the trouble of reading. I did it quite different, when I was about it."

"Screwed it out of her! Nanni! What do you mean? What did you screw out of her?"

"Why, you know what I went there for, cousin Laura!"

"You went to tell Caterina how much you loved her, I suppose."

* Sweetheart.

"Then you never supposed a greater mistake in your life, cousin Laura."

"What do you mean, Nanni? You are getting quite mysterious, which is what I should not have expected from you. What *did* you go to Caterina for?"

"What does Signor Sebastiano come here for, cousin Laura; come now?"

"He never does come here now!" said Laura, very ruefully, with a deep sigh.

"Well! when he did come, what did he come for, I want to know?"

"Well! I suppose he came here," replied Laura, bending her head to hide a little smile provoked by her appreciation of the comparison suggested to her, "I suppose he came here to tell me what I thought you went to Casa Boccanera to tell Caterina."

"And was all the telling on one side, cousin Laura?"

"Ah! . . . . Why, cousin Nanni, you are practising to set up for a father confessor."

"Well; you confess yourself, if you want to shrive me. Was all the telling on one side, I say."

"Perhaps not!" said Laura, dropping her long black eyelashes over her eyes, and picking up a pencil from the table that stood near her, as she spoke, and drawing lines with it in her absence of mind on a bit of paper.

"*I* should think not!" returned Nanni. "And perhaps you liked to hear him tell what he had to tell?"

"Perhaps I did, Nanni!"

"Well, then! Do as you would be done by! That's my notion, and a good rule all the world over.

And that is what I screwed out of Caterina. But it took a deal of screwing!"

"But it came at last, eh Nanni? And perhaps you liked it when it came?"

"Ah!" said Nanni, with a long breath, like a person smelling some exquisite perfume; "Ah! It is a mighty pleasant thing to tell, but there is one thing twenty times sweeter, and that is to be told! At least that's my mind; I don't know how you find it."

"And so it is all right, and all settled now between you and Caterina?"

"All right! barring Babbo's consent. But he won't stand out, specially when he comes to know Caterina."

"And aren't you very happy, cousin Nanni?"

"Pretty near as happy as a man can be, cousin Laura! I never did a better day's work in my life than that day that I screwed it out of Caterina, God bless her!"

"I believe it with all my heart, Nanni! and with all my heart I wish you joy. And it pleases me to think that I had some hand in bringing your happiness about."

"That you had indeed, cousin Laura! *Altro!* I shall never forget it! But then I should never have have done for you, you know. I am too rough in the grain, as a man may say," rejoined honest Nanni, who conceived that his cousin's claim to having contributed to his happiness alluded to her refusal of his addresses to herself.

Again Laura turned aside her head, very unnecessarily, to hide a smile, as she answered:

"We were both right, Nanni, and we shall contri-

bute more to each other's happiness as cousins and fast friends, than we should have done as man and wife."

"No doubt of it, cousin. And I wish with all my heart that I could do anything to bring your matters with Sebastian to as good a point as my own."

"Thanks, dear Nanni! I am sure you do. There is one thing I told you, you remember, about the opera."

"Yes, I have been thinking about it; I shall not forget."

"But I am not easy about Sebastian, Nanni. I am afraid of his being cast down and disheartened. It is a thing that men of genius like Sebastian are very subject to."

"Ah! I was afraid he was not strong," said Nanni, with much sympathy. "Poor fellow, he don't look it!"

"But you, who are strong, Nanni, strong in happiness and in hope,—I have been thinking that you might be of use to him."

"In the way of his complaint?" said Nanni, rather dubiously. "If I can any way help him, only you tell me, Laura, what to do. You don't know how great a pleasure it would be to me to do it."

"I should like you to see him, Nanni, and talk to him, and tell him to be of strong heart."

"I had rather it was anything to do than to talk," said Nanni, thoughfully. "You tell me what to say, however, and I'll do my best."

"What did you say was the sweetest thing in the world to hear, just now, Nanni?" said Laura, looking down, and again having recourse to her pencil.

"Oh, I know! only to make it what it should be, it ought to be done by *the* person."

"But as that cannot be, Nanni, you must be my messenger. Tell him that no hour passes in which I do not think of him. Tell him how anxious I am to hear of him; how earnestly I beg of him to be of good heart, and to hope. And tell him, Nanni," she continued, putting her hand into his, as if giving a solemn pledge, "tell him that never, never, never, under any circumstances, come what may, will I be the wife of any man save him."

"It shall not be my fault," said Nanni, nodding his head with great seriousness of manner, "if he is not made quite certain of that much."

"Speak to him of his opera, cousin; tell him that . . . ."

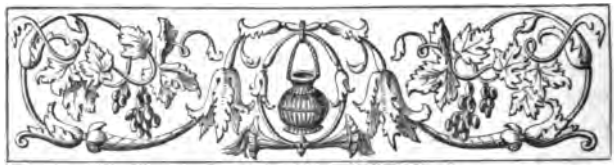
"I've got a thought!" interrupted Nanni, eagerly. "I'll tell you what will be fifty times better than my speaking to him. Let's set the Gobbo to talk to him. He's my friend. He's to help me, whenever a job that needs brains is in hand. Let the Gobbo talk to him. Let me tell my brother-in-law that is to be all about it. You may trust him. It's all in the family like. May I tell the Gobbo?"

"I think your idea is a good one, cousin. I have a great respect for Sandro Boccanera, as I told you before. I should like him to see my poor Sebastian, and to be friends with him. Yes, you may tell the Gobbo my secret, Nanni," she added, with a smile, and a little blush. "But you will go to Sebastian too, won't you, Nanni? I am sure you will help to cheer him up. And perhaps," she added, with a sly glance, "you may know what sort of things Caterina says to you better than poor Sandro could divine them."

And so it was settled that Nanni and his brain-

gifted friend should both go, and go often, to see Sebastian, and carry him such cheer as either was most able to impart.

And Nanni, feeling somewhat the weight of his new ambassadorial responsibilities, ran off to accompany his beloved and her brother to the theatre.



CHAPTER VI.

GENEALOGY AND PHYSIOLOGY.

NANNI found *la Caterina* and the Gobbo waiting for him; and they went off together at once to the little theatre, which chanced to be that conducted by our acquaintance Signor Gualandi, at which poor Sebastian's pre-condemned opera was to be brought out.

"And where have you been, 'gnor Nanni, I should like to know!" said Caterina, with a pretended pout; "I think *Vos signoria* might have given us another half hour, instead of running it to the very last moment."

"*Anima mia,* I was with Laura;"—(a somewhat more pronounced pout, only one quarter pretended on the part of Caterina)—"Nay! *Caterina mia,* you will not grudge the half hour when I tell you what we were talking of. Poor Laura is not so happy as we are. I will tell you all about it, by-and-bye, after the opera."

They paid their half paul—twopence-halfpenny sterling—per head at the door, and it being a grand occasion, and the magnificent Nanni being paymaster, a further sum of half a paul each admitted them to the "*posti distinti,*" which we call the stalls. And the Gobbo paid critical and intelligent attention to

the music, while his companions were, in their own, and my opinion, infinitely better engaged. What long-since-forgotten music it may have been which they heard who knows? For the Gobbo, from whom the main facts of this history have been principally derived, though retaining a special recollection of the evening, could only remember that it was some worthless trash which bored him to death. It may be, however, that the Gobbo was an unduly severe critic upon this occasion. For both Caterina and Nanni, though unable to recall the precise title of the piece, always declared that they had never heard music equal to it since.

The Gobbo, as they returned home, declared, in the language of Florentine artistic criticism, that the Prima Donna was a cat, and the Tenore a "*cane, che stuonava a scorticare le orecchie,*"* and vowed it was a shame to put such people on the stage to disgust the public. Perhaps it may be thought that the Gobbo was demanding too much for his twopence-halfpenny in expecting to hear accomplished singers for that sum. But such is not altogether the case now, and was still less so then, in Florence, where the present writer has heard, for half a paul, or some such sum, more than one of the greatest singers of the day in the first freshness of their voices, to greater perfection than the reader may probably have heard them afterwards for his half-guinea.

Nanni walked home with the brother and sister to their door; and when they reached it, proposed sending to the neighbouring café, before they separated, for three "ponci,"† to warm them, while he told

* "A dog, who sang out of tune enough to skin one's ears."

† Punches.

them, as he had promised Caterina that he would, all about his visit to his cousin Laura. Old *maestro* Simone had come home from his evening stroll to the café, and gone to bed long since ; so they had the sitting-room of the little lodging to themselves. The working jeweller's maid-of-all-work, who came yawningly from her sleep over her *scaldino*,* to let them in, was dispatched on this errand, and shortly returned with three small tumblers of a steaming light-red liquor, very sweet, very mawkish, and flavoured, or rather scented, with an infinitessimal dose of an alcoholic liquid of anomalous nature known to the cafés and their guests as Rhum,—pronounced "roomey";—three little tumblers, which might sicken, could scarcely, one would think, cheer, and most unquestionably could not inebriate anybody. They were consumed, however, with perfect approbation, by the trio of Tuscans; while Nanni, deeming Caterina to be included, as a matter of course, in Laura's permission to speak of her affairs to the Gobbo, explained to the latter the brain-work which, according to the convention between them, he wished him to undertake.

"I did not think, 'gnor Sandro, when we agreed, the other day, that if ever I wanted a turn of brain-work, and if ever you wanted a job that needed a stout arm, we would help one another ;—I say, I did not think that I should so soon come to claim your promise."

* A small earthenware pot, with a high arched handle over it, filled with ignited braise and hot ashes ;—an abominable contrivance, unhealthy and dangerous, which Tuscans of almost all ranks have constantly in their hands or under their feet in the winter.

"It can't be too soon, Signor Nanni; that is, if the matter in hand be not of a nature to afflict you."

"Well! Yes, it is of that nature, Sandro. I suppose most head-work is of such a nature. People don't trouble their heads much when they are happy, I fancy.

"*Santa Madonna!* Nanni! What is it? Has anything gone wrong? You frighten me!" said Caterina, who fancied that anything that afflicted Nanni must needs have reference to the one matter that sat nearest to her own heart.

"No, *cara mia!* nothing has gone wrong, at least with us. But Laura is not happy, and my heart is uneasy for her sake. I told you, you know, *Caterina mia!* as we were going to the theatre, that I would tell you all about it afterwards."

"It's nothing bad, I hope," said the Gobbo; "I have a very great regard for the Signora Laura!"

"Don't you remember asking me," said Nanni, "when I was telling you that I wanted . . . . that is, that I hoped . . . . that day, you know, that we had a long talk in the Piazza Santa Croce;—don't you remember asking me who it was that Laura liked a deal too well to have anything to say to me, ... even if I had ever thought of her."

"I remember perfectly well, Signor Nanni. And you replied with a discretion which, permit me to say, I appreciated; that you were there to tell your own secrets, but not your cousin's."

"And what secrets of your own had you to tell, Nanni?" asked Caterina.

"Oh! mine were terrible secrets. Sandro knows all about them!"

"And won't you tell me, Nanni?" pouted Caterina.

"In your ear, then!" and he stretched out his head as he spoke towards her, while she half timidly, and in all probability knowing perfectly well what was coming, but affecting the most lively curiosity, bent her face towards him.

"That was my secret!" he cried, suddenly delivering a smacking kiss on her cheek; "And now I am sure, *anima mia*, you won't ask for my secrets again in a hurry, will you?"

"For shame, Nanni! I won't let you play such tricks. If I did not think you were going to tell me something wonderful!"

"But what *were* you going to tell us, Signor Nanni?" said the Gobbo, taking more interest in the real secret to be told than in this lover's pastime.

"Why! *amico mio*, Laura has a great opinion of your cleverness, and she wants to confide to you the same as she told to me. She thinks you might and would help her, or help her *damo*, which comes to the same thing."

"Your cousin, Signor Nanni, is not deceived in me; and anything in my power is most heartily at her service. I am justified then in asking now who is the gentleman in question.

"Why! you don't mean to say, Sandro, that that is the secret you wanted to be told! Well! I should have thought that you might have known that without any telling! But men *are* so slow to see what is under their noses!"

"And pray, sister, who is the person that your own superior sharpness has pointed out to you? Or did the Signora Laura more likely tell you herself?"

"*Che!* that was not probable. And there was

little need of it. After that day at Schifanoia *I* had no doubt about the matter."

"Did you discover any other secrets of the same sort that same day, Caterina?" asked Nanni, with demonstrations of intense slyness of meaning.

"Lookers on see most of the game, they say, 'gnor Nanni. I looked on, and saw that of the Signora Laura."

"If we are to talk in earnest, *amici miei*," said the Gobbo, "let us have no more beating about the bush. Signor Nanni, I shall be glad to hear what the Signora Laura wishes you to communicate to me."

"Well, then!" returned Nanni, resolutely turning his shoulder towards Caterina, so as to shut out the temptation of any further straying from the direct path of the story he had to tell, and facing round towards Sandro, "the case is this-wise. Laura and I were intended for each other by our parents, as you no doubt know. But we never took to the notion much ourselves, neither of us. And Cousin Laura soon spied out somehow what somebody else"—pointing with his thumb over his shoulder as he spoke—"could not see till she was told it as plain as two and two make four, and then made a difficulty of believing it."

"I am not sure I believe it now, as far as that goes!" put in Caterina.

"Now, sister, if you interrupt Signor Nanni any more, I shall ask him to allow me to accompany him to his lodging, and hear what he wishes to tell me as we walk!"

"I am not going to interrupt; not I, Sandro. I think I shall go off to bed!" said his sister; but she did not move.

"Signor Nanni, I am all attention," said the Gobbo, bowing with grave courtesy.

"Well!" resumed Nanni, "Laura, I say, found out whereabouts my heart was, and told me so. And we talked it over together."

"*Grazie!** *Signore mio! Padrone!*" † said Caterina, over his shoulder.

"Now Caterina, be quiet! do, for a minute. We are engaged on business!" remonstrated the Gobbo. "Proceed, Signor Nanni!"

"So, said I to Laura," continued Nanni, heroically resisting the temptation to accept Caterina's challenge to a sparring match, "Fair play is a jewel, cousin! You know all my secrets. But you tell me none of yours. And for awhile she stood to it that she had none to tell. For they are like one another as two furrows in a field, girls are."

"*Grazie, Signore!* I am not gone to bed yet, though you seem to think so!"

"As like one another in the matter of standing out; they don't care for a fellow, I mean;" continued Nanni, thus admonished; "but at last I got her to own that she and young Lunardi, Sebastiano you know, had given their troth to each other. Well, once her secret told, she was not loth to talk of it. And then she said that she was unhappy—her father, my uncle, would not hear of it; and she could not see him to talk to him; and how he was apt to be down-hearted by reason of being so clever, and she was very anxious about him; and she wished if I could I would see him, and let him understand that she was true to

* Thanks.

† "Master." The word is used thus by itself to signify "At your service!" or "Please yourself!" &c.

him, and always would be through thick and thin, come what might, and try to put a good heart into him. And so as she went on talking in that way, it suddenly came into my head, this is a job for a man with brains. Sandro would be the man for it ten to one more than I. And I told Laura as much. And she jumped at it. She has a great notion of you, Sandro, Laura has. 'So,' says she, 'tell him all I have told you. Tell him I would take it kind of him if he would see Sebastiano, and try to be of comfort to him.' And that's about the whole of the story."

"Which I could have told for you, *Signore mio*, in two words to your hundred!" said Caterina.

"*Anima mia!*" why didn't you then? I wish you had!" said poor Nanni, simply.

"Why is Signor Giuseppe, your respected uncle, so averse to the marriage of his daughter with the Signore de' Lunardi, once he has made up his mind to give up the match he had first intended?" asked the Gobbo, thoughtfully.

"Why! that stands to reason;" answered Nanni. "Naturally my uncle, who is a warm man, would wish to give his only daughter to somebody who could put money to his money. My uncle thinks more about money than we do in the country," he added, hurriedly, recollecting the circumstances of his own proposed wife in this respect; "he wants a rich son-in-law, and these Lunardi have nothing, not bread to eat, it seems, when the old Canon dies."

The Gobbo mused over this statement a minute or two in silence. It seemed clear then that Sebastiano knew nothing about the thirty-five thousand scudi, the existence of which he had become acquainted with by so strange a chance. Nobody knew better than

he that the old Conte de' Lunardi, Marietta's father, had died worth less than nothing. And indeed he had seen enough in the paper he had read to know that the sum he knew to be now in the possession of the Contessa Marietta, was the product of yearly accumulations. But what could be the destination of it, if not to Sebastian? How could Sebastian's evident ignorance of the existence of it be accounted for? There was some mystery in the matter, which baffled his conjectures and vividly excited his curiosity. He very quickly, however, made up his mind to say nothing about it to Nanni, partly because a secret was a treasure, which the Gobbo's peculiarities always disposed him to keep wholly to himself; but chiefly because he would not run any risk of doing mischief to Marietta or her plans, whatever they might be.

At length he said; "And the Signora Laura, nevertheless, is determined to give her hand to no other."

"*Altro che* determined! And Laura will stand to her word, you may depend upon it. And uncle Giuseppe will find out that he must have Sebastiano for a son-in-law or none at all. You'll come and see him, Sandro!"

"Certainly I will do anything that you and La Signora Laura wish; but I do not see that there is much good to be done."

"She wants you to speak to him too about an opera he is writing. It seems that his heart is set on the success of this opera; and indeed so is Laura's too, for that matter. They both hope that he may better his position by it. It don't seem to me as if a man could do much by such work as that."

"Nay! I don't know that!" replied the Gobbo;

"success at that, as at most other things, is likely to be well paid. The question is, has the Signore Sebastiano the talent to make a success?"

"Laura is convinced that he has; and that is one of the things that she wants us to help him in."

"In what way?"

"Why! the opera is to be brought out next Carnival at the theatre we were at to-night. He has got a promise of that."

"And that already is a success that many another would be only too happy to reach!"

"But the thing is to make it go down with the public, you see. Now, if we had a good strong party of friends in the theatre, don't you see? I am as good as another at clapping my hands, and crying '*bravo! brava! bravi!*'"

"Ay! we might lend the piece a helping hand in that way no doubt. I dare say I could bring a good party of friends."

"And I would bring up a lot of boys from the Casentino, fellows whose hands are hard enough to do any quantity of clapping!"

"When shall we go and see him, Signor Nanni?"

"We can go to-morrow morning, if you will. But, you see, we must manage so as to see him quietly alone, you know. And that reminds me, that I have not told you all poor Laura's difficulties yet. You would hardly believe it; but it seems, from what Laura says, that his family are as much against any such marriage as my uncle is!"

"Objections to family alliances may arise from very different reasons," observed the Gobbo, rather sententiously.

"About ancestors, you mean!" said Nanni, with great simplicity; "that's just it!"

"The Conti dei Lunardi;" rejoined the Gobbo majestically and with an air of recognised superiority, "are justified in scrutinising somewhat narrowly the blood with which they ally themselves. There does not exist at this day in Florence a purer and nobler race than theirs. But I confess that I had always thought the old Canon singularly — and may I venture, without offence, Signor Nanni, to say, lamentably?—indifferent to all such considerations."

"Offence, *caro mio!*" cried Nanni, stretching out his hand to the little man. "If ever you mean to offend me, Sandro, you must tell me so plainly; or else ten to one I shall never guess it from what you say. What is it to me what the old Canon thinks about his ancestors? But my notion about it is this—Look you! I think a man's wise to get all the pleasure he can out of his ancestors; but if I had ever so many myself, I would not let them stand in the way of my happiness."

"*Noblesse oblige!*" said Sandro, loftily.

"What! do you understand French?" said Nanni, gazing at his brother-in-law *in posse* with exceeding admiration. "What a thing it is to have brains! I don't know any speech but Tuscan. But I guess your meaning to be, that they can't help being nobles. And that's very true. But I was going to say that it's not the old Canon who'd stand in the way, but the Lady Marietta."

"Ah! I see!" said the Gobbo: "the Lady Marietta *has* a high sense of what is due to, and what is expected from, the scions of an ancient race. And your cousin has reason to think that the attachment

of Signor Sebastian would be discountenanced by the Contessa Marietta?"

"Not a doubt of it! And she is afraid that Sebastian might find difficulty in going in the face of her. They all seem afraid of the Contessa Marietta, *per Bacco!*"

"I have a great respect for the Contessa Marietta myself;" said the Gobbo, gravely.

"But you don't mean to say, Sandro, that if a man's ancestors have so managed their affairs, that he has not bread to eat, he ought to refuse bread, pretty thickly buttered too, when it is offered to him, for no reason except for their sake?"

"No! I don't say that!" replied the Gobbo, after a thoughtful pause: "and methinks, Signor Nanni, that you should know that I don't say so. Perhaps practical wisdom," he continued, speaking more to himself than to Nanni,—"wisdom of a higher kind than that of merely knowing on which side one's bread is buttered,—requires us to subordinate our feelings and imaginations on this subject to other considerations."

Nanni had subdolously stretched out his hand sideways during this speech to administer a squeeze to a rosy little hand that timidly stole out half way to meet his, and was, notwithstanding such aiding and abetting, punished for his audacity by a pinch of the ear from the rosy little hand's fellow. But being much ashamed at the evident detection of this by-play by his wise brother-in-law, and feeling himself called upon to continue the conversation, he said, doubtfully;

"One would think, now, that Laura's blood was good, to look at her!"

"Ay! that's the point! You have hit the nail of the difficulty on the head, Signor Nanni, with the most accurate perception of the knot of the matter!" said the Gobbo, considerably more to Nanni's surprise and mystification than satisfaction.

"No! Have I, though!" said he, with a tone of alarm in his voice.

"To be sure! It's just that. Genealogy and Physiology . . . . "

"*Misericordia!*" murmured Nanni, interjectively.

". . . . . are too often at odds with each other, you see. If we arrange society wholly in accordance with the requirements of the former, we are apt to get tripped up by the latter. Look, as you say, at the Signora Laura, and look at . . . . some other folks!" concluded the Gobbo, rather bitterly.

Nanni did look at him hard for a minute before speaking; and then he said:

"Sandro, I'll be honest! If I hit the nail on the head, as you said, *Corpo di Bacco!* I hit it without seeing it. And I have no more idea of what you are talking about now than if it was all Arabic!* I told cousin Laura that you'd be the man to talk to Signor Bastiano. And, may be, what you have been saying would be good for him. What time shall we go to-morrow?"

"Suppose we say at eleven;" replied Sandro. "I will get away from the shop an hour before dinner-time; the old Canon will be taking his *siesta;* and we shall probably find Signor Bastiano in his room."

"Very good. So be it!" said Nanni. "But I had better not come for you to the Ponte Vecchio."

* "Arabo" is rather curiously often used by the Tuscans to signify anything very outlandish and strange.

"Perhaps not. I'll meet you, say at the Caffé Elvetico."

"Good! I'll be there at eleven."

So good nights were said; Caterina lighted Nanni down to the street-door; and if I had been there, I should have asserted the right of "*seniores priores*," and walked out, turning my back on the young people, and looking straight before me.

CHAPTER VII.

NANNI'S EMBASSY.

THE next morning Nanni was true to his tryst at the Caffé Elvetico, and had not finished his tiny cup of coffee before the Gobbo came in.

"Will you take a cup of coffee before we go to our affair, Sandro?" said Nanni, after they had exchanged greetings.

"Not this morning, if *Vossignoria* will excuse me," returned the Gobbo; "for it would be well for us to go to Palazzo Lunardi at once. To-day is the festival of Saint Leonard. And I happen to know that La Contessa Marietta will at this hour be engaged in the chapel of the family at the church of San Giacomo di Lunardi. It would be as well to make our visit during her absence."

"Certainly! By all means?" said Nanni, with much alacrity. "Let us go at once. I had quite as lief do our errand when Signora Marietta is not there."

And so saying, he threw down his two crazie, about five farthings sterling, on the little oval brass tray, tinkled his spoon against the glass of water which stood by the little brass porringer, which had held the modicum of coffee, and the two young men walked

out of the *café* without waiting for any more formal settlement with the waiter, and leaving him to pick up the tray and the money at his leisure, after the easy-going Tuscan fashion.

"You go in first," said Nanni, as they stood at the door of the old Canon's apartment, on the third floor; "and explain what we have come for. I have a very slight acquaintance with Signor Sebastiano."

"Nor have I much. But doubtless the nature of our mission will ensure us a welcome."

The door was opened to them by the ecclesiastically-dressed little servant-boy mentioned in a former chapter, who informed them that His Reverence the Canon was taking his *siesta* as usual, that the Signora Marietta was at church, as the Gobbo had foreseen she would be, and that the Signor Sebastiano was in his own chamber, very busy.

Il Beato Leonardo,—for, strictly speaking, that worthy, who is commemorated on the 27th of November, was no saint, but only a "*beato*," who is to a canonised saint much as a K.C.B. is to G.C.B. *Il Beato* Leonardo had been—or would it be more correct to say was? (the difference, as the judicious reader will perceive, involves a point of theology of no small difficulty and interest)—*Il Beato* Leonardo had been, and perhaps still was, the patron of a certain Cardinal Leonardo di' Lunardi, who lived towards the end of the seventeenth century, and who had founded an anniversary mass at the altar of the family chapel in the church of San Giacomo di' Lunardi, in honour of his patron and of himself. And this anniversary service the Lady Marietta made a point of attending, as the Gobbo knew well. The Cardinal had been minded to do the thing

handsomely; it was a "grand mass," and the Lady Marietta, therefore, was safe till past midday.

Signor Sebastiano was very busy in his own chamber; but the visitors, nevertheless, requested the little servant to tell him that two gentlemen wished to speak with him, and were immediately invited to walk into the musician's tiny *sanctum*.

This little chamber has been already mentioned; but, for the clear understanding of what follows, it is necessary that the reader should be made more accurately acquainted with the geography of the small apartment. There were three rooms in the front, looking into the pleasant sunny *loggia* which faced to the south-east. The middle one of these was the sitting-room. That on the left hand of it, as one entered it by the door opposite to the terrace window opening on to the *loggia*, was the Canon's bedroom; and that on the right hand Marietta's bedroom. These two chambers were accessible only from the middle room. Behind these three rooms ran the centre wall of the house, for a great deal of the space on this third floor was occupied by the *loggia*; and this wall was enormously thick. On the other side of it, at the back of the sitting-room, was the entrance hall, all but dark, but as large as the sitting-room itself. The two rooms at the back of the chambers of Marietta and the Canon would also have been as large as those good-sized rooms, if a part of the space had not been occupied by two dark closets, one on either side of the entrance, and thus lying between the two bedrooms at the front and the rooms behind each of them. Why these dark holes should have been constructed at the cost of spoiling the two back rooms it would be difficult to imagine,

unless it were in obedience to the rule which seems to have been imperative on all the architects of the buildings contemporary or thereabouts with Palazzo Lunardi, to waste as much space as possible. Of these two dark closets, that behind the chamber of Marietta was used as an appendage to the little kitchen, which was again behind that. This dark scullery, therefore, was between the kitchen and Marietta's room. The other dark closet, that to the left of the entrance hall, lay similarly between the Canon's bedroom and the chamber occupied by Sebastiano. But, inasmuch as the description here given would imply that the space at the disposition of the architect had been divided symmetrically and by rectangularly arranged walls, and as such a distribution would have been utterly inconsistent with the traditions and practices of the old Florentine builders (whose descendants never, to the present day, build a house with right angles if they can possibly avoid it); it must be explained that the wall which divided the entrance hall from the chamber of Sebastian and the dark closet behind it, was sloped at such an angle as to make that side of the closet which adjoined the Canon's room about a foot longer than the latter, so as to encroach that much on the hall, and to cause so much of the space of the closet to be behind the sitting-room, instead of being entirely behind the Canon's room. It seemed that the architect had scrupled to injure the privacy of the two side rooms, which were probably intended for sleeping chambers, by seeking any light for his dark closets by borrowing it from them. But he had availed himself of the bit of that closet on the left hand, which projected behind the centre room, to

get a glimmer of light for it by opening a very small window high up in that part of the wall between the two rooms.

The closet thus partially lighted was used by the present occupiers of the apartment only as a receptacle for a number of old family portraits, which, at her father's death, Marietta had contrived to save from the brokers. They were too numerous, and many of them too large to be hung on the humble walls of their present dwelling; and they had been stowed away, forgotten by everybody save Marietta, in that dark lumber room, when the Canon had first moved into his new home in the house of his ancestors. There they were, those poor old Lunardis, huddled into the corner of their whilome dwelling, stacked against the wall some twenty or thirty deep, with some of the lighter and smaller frameless canvases heaped on the top of the layer of their relatives below, in such wise as to block up the little window entirely, and cause the existence of it high up in one corner of their sitting-room to be forgotten by the inhabitants.

"Signor Boccanera, ... Signor Palli . . . . ." said Sebastian, rising from his piano as his very unexpected visitors entered; "I hardly know *davvero*, whether I can ask you to sit down, for I am afraid I have not the means to offer such hospitality. Here is one chair, Signori . . . ."

"And I'll sit on the bed by you, Signor Sebastiano; and Sandro shall have the chair, because he is the man that is going to do the talking;" said Nanni, breaking through his intention not to be the first to speak; for he saw by his heightened colour that Sebastian was embarrassed, and was in a hurry to relieve him.

"Since you are so kind, Signori . . . . ," hesitated Sebastian. "Otherwise I might have asked you to take the trouble of walking into the next room."

"Oh, no! let us stay here; I like sitting on a bed of all things;" said Nanni.

"Signor Conte," began the Gobbo, with a courteous bow from the chair, "we have taken the liberty of waiting on you bringing with us our credentials from one for whose sake we venture to hope that our visit will not be unwelcome."

"Pray, believe, Signore, that you need no credentials from any one to make your visit welcome;' replied Sebastian, wondering more than ever what was to come next.

"*Signore mio*," struck in Nanni, observing that Sebastian's manner towards them was stiff and embarrassed, and instinctively divining the cause of his marked coldness, with a fellow-feeling that for once rendered him quicker witted than his clever companion, and guessing the means of at once putting them on pleasanter terms together; "*Signore mio*, in the first place, I come to claim your congratulations. I am sure," he added, intending to put a special meaning into his manner, "I am quite sure that it will give you pleasure to hear that I am going to be married."

But Sebastian's jealous fears gave a very different meaning to the intelligence from that intended by honest Nanni. And he became perfectly livid in the face, as he gasped out, "Signore! . . . . . I am glad . . . . . that is, I thank you for . . . . . the intelligence, which . . . . . ." and the drops of perspiration stood on his brow as he spoke.

"And Sandro here," continued Nanni, understand-

ing what was passing in the other's mind as clearly as if he had been the most cultivated scholar in the world, "my brother-in-law that is to be, I hope very shortly, was kind enough to accompany me."

"Your brother-in-law!" stammered poor Sebastian, not daring to feel sure that he understood him aright.

"Yes! that's to be it! And very happy shall I be to call him so. You know *La Caterina*, I think, Signor Sebastiano? Do you not wish me joy?"

"With all my heart, my dear Signor Palli, but . ."

"Ah! I thought you would!" said Nanni, winking one eye hard with a not very successful attempt at an expression of intense slyness; "I thought you would with *all* your heart."

"Indeed I do," replied Sebastian, whose thoughts were still in a whirl of confusion; "indeed I do; but . . . . the intelligence is so sudden . . . . I thought that . . . . I had supposed . . . ."

"That the old folk were going to have it all their own way without taking any count of which way their son's and daughter's hearts jumped. That's what you thought, wasn't it, Signor Sebastiano, eh? But that did not suit my book, you see! And it did not suit my cousin's a bit better, Signor Sebastiano; and Laura thinks you ought to have known as much; and she sent me here to tell you so. So there's the cat out of the bag. Yes! this is to be my brother-in-law, and I hope you won't object to me for a cousin-in-law. Will you shake hands upon it?"

And Nanni thrust out his great broad hand with a meaning in the action, and in the frank cheery smile that mantled in his jolly sun-burned face and handsome large soft eyes, which would have disarmed the suspiciousness of an Old Bailey attorney.

The poor nervous musician trembling all over with agitation and excitement, caught the hand extended to him in both his long thin white hands, and said while the tears filled his eyes:

"How can I thank you, my dear friend! And she sent you to me! Dear, dear Laura! And you, Signor Boccanera, did Laura speak to you? . . ."

The Gobbo, who had been told that he was to accompany his friend specially to do the talking, and who was never apt to be in the back ground when talking was the business in hand, had begun to feel somewhat impatient at Nanni's so unexpectedly taking the stroke oar in the conversation, and seized the opportunity offered him of taking the lead.

"Not on the present occasion, Signor Conte! I was apprised by my friend Signor Palli, that it was the wish of *La Signora Laura*, for whom I have the greatest possible respect, that I should wait on you. The lady was good enough to think, that I might perhaps be able to express to you more adequately than my excellent friend and intended brother-in-law the entirety of the devotion with which her affections are fixed, and . . . I may say, concentred" . . . .

"The long and the short of it is," cut in Nanni, impatiently, "you be true to Laura and she'll be true to you, ay, to the death; despite fathers or cousins, or riches, or poverty! yours and nobody else's, come weal, come woe! And that, *amico mio*, from such a girl as Laura, though she is my own uncle's daughter, is, to my thinking, a fair share of happiness for one man, as the world goes, be the rest how it may."

"In fact, Signor Conte," resumed poor Sandro, a little discomfited (and it was rather hard, considering that he had been told he was to go there on purpose

to talk); "I can have no hesitation in confirming the somewhat . . . . . I may perhaps say, unornamented announcement of my friend, Signor Palli, that such *are* the sentiments of the very amiable young lady in question."

"I true to Laura!" exclaimed Sebastiano.

"Not that it forms any part of our commission, and I am sure my friend Palli will agree in this view of the matter, if he will obligingly express himself somewhat less precipitately, to submit to you, on the part of the lady, Signor Conte, the smallest doubt as existing in her mind of the perfect fidelity of your affection," observed the Gobbo, with diplomatic caution

"Ah! but this is where it is, Signor Sebastiano; to be true to Laura you must be true to yourself. A man, you see, has no right to give up the game when he's got a partner."

Honest Nanni, who only had it in his mind to preach against the tendency to discouragement and faint-heartedness of which Laura had spoken, had no idea how home a thrust he had made. But Sebastiano little doubted that the Canon of St. Lorenzo had allowed what had passed between them to be known to some one, who had repeated it to Laura. Was it not, indeed, probable enough that he might himself have communicated to Laura, or her father, his interview; for it was evident that the Canon's idea was, that it would be better in every way that all idea of a marriage between him and Laura should be definitively abandoned. And the priest had led him honestly to think that he was most generously and honourably doing his duty by Laura in giving her up. But the blunt truth of Nanni's words put the matter in another light before his mind.

"There is truth in what you say, Signore Nanni," replied Sebastiano, with a deep sigh; "but may it not be questioned, on the other hand, whether a man is acting well who drags the woman he loves into misery and misfortune with him? Ought he not rather to give her up and bear the burthen of his destiny alone?"

"It is impossible, Signor Conte, to gainsay the magnanimity of such a sentiment," began the Gobbo; "nevertheless ——"

But Nanni, who had never talked so much consecutively in his life before, and who admitted afterwards to the Gobbo, that he was astonished at himself, and did not know what had come to him, once more interrupted him;

"No, Sandro! not impossible to gainsay it, because I do gainsay it. If a woman would fifty thousand times rather share your misfortune than another man's fortune, do you call it magnanimous, or—to let alone such big words—any way hearty and loving, to leave her to break her heart, because it hurts your pride to think that you have not been able to do any better for her? I don't!"

"I will think, my dear friend," said Sebastian, much moved, "I will think of what you say."

"But perhaps there may be no need of thinking of such things at all;" rejoined Nanni. "Why talk of misfortunes before they come. Laura hopes great things from the opera, I hear, you are going to bring out."

"Ay! here it is!" said the musician, pointing to the leaves on the piano. Heaven knows! Sometimes I hope; sometimes I have no hope. The time is drawing very near now."

"What day is it fixed for, Signor Conte?" asked the Gobbo.

"The third of January. It is to be the second piece for the Carnival season."

"Is it in rehearsal yet, Signor Conte?"

"Not yet; we shall begin the rehearsals about the middle of next month. Signor Gualandi assures me that will be quite time enough."

"He has seen the work, of course, Signor Conte?"

"Oh, yes! He declares that he has great hopes from it. He professes to like the music himself, much."

"And you may be sure that he is sincere, for he would not have accepted the piece otherwise," said Nanni.

"And the judgment of an experienced *impresario* must be a very shrewd one," rejoined the Gobbo. "If anybody can tell what will please the public, he must be able to do so."

"And yet many operas utterly and disgracefully fail?" said the composer with a sigh. "Believe me, my friends, it is a horribly nervous thing, a veritable agony for a composer—the first night of a new work. There you must be in the orchestra,* visible to every eye in the house, obliged to give every faculty of your mind to the orchestra and the singers, yet painfully striving to catch the slightest indication of the feeling of the public, and conscious all the while that the stupidity or incompetency of others may at any moment wreck you! Ah! trust me, it is a veritable martyrdom!"

"Proportionably great must the triumph be," re-

* Until quite recently the composer of a new opera, was in Italy always expected to conduct it in person.

marked the Gobbo, "when your work is accepted by the public, and you receive in person the applause and admiration of your fellow-citizens. Ah! that must be a very delightful moment, worth the labour of many a night, and the anxieties of many a day!"

"Yes!" sighed Sebastian, "there are the pleasures for the conquerors, as well as the pains for the vanquished."

"It is never wise, Signor Conte, if you will pardon me for saying so," returned the Gobbo, "to take up sorrow at interest, as the saying goes. Let us not anticipate the possibility of failure. I have heard enough to be quite sure that your talent is a real one. How many very competent judges do we know who have esteemed it such. And then as to the little stratagems and manœuvres of the theatre, you may be very sure that your friends will not be backward in giving you a helping hand."

Laura's caution to Nanni about not dropping a word of any such friendly plot to Sebastian, it will be observed had not been communicated to the Gobbo,—fortunately as the matter stood.

"My dear friends," cried Sebastian, with great eagerness, "for Heaven's sake do not attempt any thing of the kind. You are little versed in the ways of our theatres, Signor Sandro, if you suppose that the tactics we hear so much of from Paris could be put in action here. Believe me, that a more certain way to ensure the failure of any piece at an Italian theatre could not be found than the appearance of any attempt to get up a factitious approval. It would be instantly resented by the public. Why, do you suppose, is the approval of an opera at Milan

Venice, or Florence, felt by the musical world throughout Europe to stamp it permanently with a reputation, that no success at Paris would suffice to achieve for it? Only because it is well known that a purchased success pronounced by a packed jury is possible at Paris and impossible in Italy. And whence does this remarkable difference arise?

"I confess, Signor Conte, I am at a loss to what circumstances to attribute such a fact."

"Why, simply to the existence of the *corsie* * in our theatres, those genuine arenas for the criticism and judgment of the true public, which our *impresarii* would so gladly get rid of, but of which an Italian public knows the use too well to part with them."

"And what is the use of them?" asked Nanni in his ignorance of the habitudes of Florentine life.

"Why, just this, Signor Nanni," replied the musician; "don't you see that the judgment pronounced thus becomes a collective and a motived one instead of one based on the lead of a few individuals guided either by caprice, or by friendship, or by enmity? Don't you see that the opportunity thus secured, and so amply used in our theatres, of communicating impressions, conferring, comparing opinions, and exercising superintendence over the honesty of them, makes just all the difference. Where every individual of the audience is fixed in his place, with a stranger probably on either side of him, the judgment of the public may be, and almost infallibly is, determined by the lead of a few noisy individuals,

* The ample passages around the seats in the pit, left vacant so that continual circulation and movement in them is practicable (and in fact always practised) in Italian theatres, are so called.

who act either in obedience to preconcerted determination, or wholly independently of each other. An author's fate is very differently decided in the "*corsie*" of our theatres. He must with us abide the reasoned, compared, and combined judgment of the men most capable of judging him. And depend upon it, my kind friends, that any attempt to evade or over-ride this judgment would be so resented as to condemn any author so unadvised as to attempt it, to a certain and ignominious *fiasco!*"

Sebastian had just ended his exposition of the difference between the circumstances under which theatrical criticism exists on the northern and on the southern side of the Alps—a statement of the facts of the case quite as true at the present day as in the first quarter of the century—when the three young men heard a ring at the door of the apartment, and in the next minute could distinguish the voice of the Rev. Guido Guidi asking if the Signora Contessa Marietta were at home. The boy replied, that she was gone to mass in the neighbouring church; whereupon the Canon said, that he would step in and await her return in the *loggia*.

It struck the Gobbo as strange that the priest should not have been well aware that Marietta was at the church. Even he had, as has been seen, been well aware that at that hour on that day she would certainly be so engaged. And it seemed very unlikely that the Canon, whose intimacy in the family was so very much closer, should be ignorant of the fact. Very probably the same idea suggested itself to Sebastian, who must have known that the priest was far too old and intimate a friend of his cousin for him not to

be aware of her habit in this respect. Whether it were any feeling arising from this circumstance, or whether it were caused by the consciousness that the little party in the artist's chamber had been expressing opinions and hopes very strongly at variance with the views of the *Canonico* with regard to Sebastian, some feeling there was, which induced all three of the young men to agree, by means of mutual glances, and the interchange of some of those telegraphic gestures so familiar and intelligible to Italians, that they would keep quiet where they were, so as not to let the new comer know that they were there.

Some further conversation then took place between the composer and Nanni, as to the absolute necessity of his abstaining from any such friendly attempts to contribute to the theatrical success of the former, as he had contemplated; and from that they passed to talk of the probabilities and possibilities of Signor Giuseppe Palli's being induced to give his consent to a marriage between his daughter and Sebastian, speaking together in a manner which rather threw out the Gobbo from the conversation. It seemed, therefore, to be only a natural consequence of this, when he said suddenly,

"Signor Conte, does not that little door in the wall of your chamber communicate with the closet, where the family pictures are stored away?"

"Yes! but I never use it. The closet is pretty well filled with the old pictures!"

"Might I have a look at them while you are finishing your talk with my friend Nanni? You know how much interest I take in such matters. May I?"

"Oh, yes! certainly. Better not make much noise

though," he added, with a look which plainly said, "Remember that he is there!"

"Never fear, I will be as still as a mouse."

So the Gobbo slipped into the dark closet, shutting the little door behind him, and thus shutting out almost all the little light there was; which would have seemed odd to Sebastian and Palli, if they had happened to think about the matter.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CANON AND THE GOBBO.

THE Gobbo was as good as his word in making no noise in the closet. Sebastiano and Nanni heard no sound on the other side of the thin partition which divided the closet from the chamber, and still less of course could any have been heard in the sitting-room through the immensely thick wall which divided it from the back part of the building. Sebastian and Nanni continued their conversation in low voices; and as the two young men gradually became more friendly and more confidential in their talk on the subjects, which had so powerful an interest for both of them, they almost forgot all about the Gobbo in the closet.

Had they not done so they might have wondered much at his prolonged absence, for assuredly the closet was not a place well adapted for the examination of pictures. But, although it was perfectly true that Sandro Boccanera was very fond of such old family memorials, and had his memory stored with a vast mass of genealogical lore, which made them particularly interesting to him, the truth was that it was another specialty of his character, and a different taste which had prompted him to find an excuse for

ensconcing himself in the closet. He had marked long since, and perfectly well remembered the little window, which, blocked up as it was by some of the lighter pictures which had been heaped on the edges of their more massive companions on the side of the closet, was yet visible enough though not very conspicuous on the side of the sitting-room. And the chance afforded by this means of spying the movements of the Canon of San Lorenzo at a moment when he could least suspect that any eye was upon him had tempted the Gobbo with a power he could not resist.

In the first place he hated the Reverend Guido Guidi, and believed him to be always engaged in some mischief or other. In the next place his curiosity, always on the alert, had been especially excited by the fact, he had ascertained from overhearing the conversation between the Canon and the jeweller on the Ponte Vecchio, that the former was engaged in thwarting the marriage, in favour of which his sympathies were now enlisted. Further he could not help suspecting that Guidi must be acquainted with the secret of Marietta's treasure which evidently was unknown to Sebastian ; and he was anxious to ascertain if it was on the present occasion part of the purpose of the Canon to hold communication with the old man who was sleeping in the chamber to the left of the sitting-room.

No sooner had he shut the door of the closet upon him, than profiting by the faint ray of light which found its way through the window, he began noiselessly and with cat-like daintiness of movement and dexterity to remove the small pictures which blocked up the window. This done, he ascertained that the

massive frames of the lower tier standing one against the other, some ten or twelve feet deep, would bear his weight, and lightly stepping on the top of them found himself with his face close to the one dusty frame of glass that formed the little window. So placed, with the dark closet behind him, there was no possibility that he should be seen from the sitting-room, even if the Canon had chanced to raise his eyes to the forgotten little window.

There was no one in the room when he looked into it. Had the Canon gone into the old man's chamber, or merely stepped out on to the *loggia?* Or had he possibly taken advantage of Marietta's absence to enter her room,—perhaps to inspect those secret accounts? At all events by remaining in his present position patiently for a short time it was probable that he would be able to ascertain at least thus much.

In the sitting-room the cloth was laid for the family dinner at mid-day. There was the old Canon's place at right angles with the window,—unmistakeably his, for the great arm-chair was placed ready for him,—while one ordinary rush-bottomed chair was set on the opposite side of the table, and another facing the window. This latter was probably Marietta's place, for there was only a *carafe* of water beside the plate, while at the old Canon's right hand there was a small quarter-flask of wine, and at that of the person opposite—of course Sebastian's place—there was a larger and more ordinary flask.

"I suppose she drinks only water," thought the Gobbo to himself, drawing according to his habit all the information he could, from what was before his

eyes; "but they give the old man some good wine. No more than is right too! I dare say there is something choice to comfort the old fellow's heart in that nice little flask—his daily portion, no doubt. Our friend Sebastian takes a more ordinary drink. There is a little roll too, I see under the old man's napkin; and a loaf of second bread for the others. Marietta takes care of the old man, as it's right enough she should, but spends as little as may be upon herself and her cousin, it should seem."

The Gobbo had carried his observations and deductions thus far, when somewhat to his disappointment he saw the Canon enter the room from the *loggia*. He had not been to the old man then, nor had he been intruding into the Signora Marietta's chamber. After all he had been merely lounging in the *loggia* while expecting her return from mass. Is he going away though without waiting for her? He walks across the room to the door, and puts his hand to the lock; . . . . but apparently only to try it, and assure himself that it is shut. Strange enough! The Gobbo's hopes of seeing something worth spying are beginning to revive again. And what's this? The Reverend gentleman steps lightly across the room yet again, and this time to the door of the chamber occupied by the Canon. What can he be going to do or say to the old Canon of the Duomo, that should induce him thus to assure himself of his privacy?

But no, he is not going to enter the old man's room! He puts his ear to the door; his object, apparently, is only to ascertain that the old Canon is not stirring. The Gobbo was more and more entirely unable to guess what was to come next. The Canon

went to the window, cast a glance into the *loggia* as if to assure himself that no living creature was by any possibility in it, although but a minute before he had entered from the *loggia* himself;—and having satisfied himself that no eye was there, nevertheless closed the terrace window. Did he think that in shutting out the full light of open day, he also shrouded himself from the gaze of another Eye?

He stood for a minute after he had closed the window, with his face towards it, and consequently with his back turned to the eye that was watching all these movements with absorbing interest. He was apparently doing something, which needed the light, for his head was bent, and the Gobbo could see from the position and movement of his arms that he was in some way using his hands.

Presently he turned, and stepping up to the table prepared for dinner, with a quick and light step, took up the small flask which flanked the plate laid for the old master of the house, and withdrawing the small tuft of straw which closed the mouth of it, poured into it from a little white paper packet, he had in his hand . . . something;—doubtless, as the Gobbo thought from the action and the paper, a powder. Placing his thumb on the small mouth of the flask, he gave the contents of it one shake, then replaced the straw-tuft, which did duty for a cork, and after occupying in doing all this less than a minute, returned with as quick and light a step to the window, and cast a hasty glance round the room. He opened the window as it had been before, looked out into the *loggia*, listened for an instant once again at the door of the old Canon; and then passed out

into the entrance hall, where the Gobbo heard him call the servant lad, and say to him :—

"Tell the Signora, that she has been longer at church than I had anticipated. I cannot stay now, but will call and see her to-morrow in the afternoon."

And so saying he walked off.

A very few seconds had been allowed to the Gobbo, as will have been observed, to recover from the extreme amazement, into which that which he had seen had thrown him, and to determine on his own course of action in the emergency. But these few seconds had sufficed him for the purpose.

Of course to an Englishman the line of conduct to be pursued under the circumstances seems clear and simple enough. Of course he would "give immediate information" of what he had seen; he would at all events on the instant tell the facts to those nearest him, and in all probability would deem it his duty to "call in the police."

Another than the Gobbo might even in Florence have communicated the startling facts of which he had been witness to the two young men, his own friends and companions. But as for the myrmidons of the law! *Che!* A very pretty thing to make an accusation against a priest, and one in the position of the Canon of San Lorenzo!—an accusation, which if anything, was a charge of intent to poison! "Where should I be before nightfall?" the Gobbo would have asked, if anyone had proposed to him a line of action so wholly in disaccordance with Tuscan ideas and habits. "Where should I be? In the Bargello to be sure!" But the flask, the bodily evidence of the truth of your assertion? "Oh! there

would be small difficulty about that. The flask would disappear very shortly, never more to be heard of, unless indeed one filled with perfectly pure wine were brought forward by the police in vindication of the character of a Very Reverend Canon, and a nobleman, and for the suppression of scandal, and the due punishment of Jacobins and suspicious persons. Even in these days a Tuscan rarely dreams under any circumstances of voluntarily having anything to say to the police. Bad indeed, in their estimation must the evil be, which would not be rendered worse to all parties concerned by letting the police have anything to do or to say in the matter!

But the Gobbo could not bring himself to share so great and important a secret with anyone!—at all events not yet, not till he had had time to consider the matter in all its bearings, and to savour the pleasure of knowing himself the sole depositary of such a piece of information. Had Guidi remained in the house, he might have been compelled to say at once what he had seen, although it would have taxed his moral courage very severely to have done so. For the Gobbo never contemplated for an instant suffering the old man to drink the draught which he firmly believed to be poisoned. But as it was, the departure of the priest facilitated a scheme for meeting cunning by cunning, which he had instantly conceived.

The moment he heard the door of the apartment close behind the Canon, he came out from his hiding place, not by the door opening into the chamber of Sebastian, but by another, which communicated with the entrance hall. Then entering the sitting-

room, and calling the servant, he asked the boy some question about the view from the *loggia*,—was that long steep ridge of tiles there, the roof of such a church? or some such matter; and then turning from the window, as if about to leave the room, he said:

"So the old gentleman takes a glass of choice wine, I see. I dare say now there is something very good in here!" touching the little flask as he spoke.

"I believe you!" said the boy; "that's the best wine in the Albizi cellar, that is. The Signora buys it on purpose for the old gentleman. I have to fetch it every two or three days."

"Then I tell you what I wish you would do, my boy. I should like very much to get a little such wine for my old father. If you'll run and get me just such a quarter flask as you get for the Canon, I will give you a couple of *crazie* for your trouble. It's close here; you won't be gone ten minutes."

"But that wine costs two *lire* the flask! it does, *davvero!* That makes six *crazie* for the quarter flask, you know."

"Very good. Six *crazie* for the wine, and two yourself, makes a *paul*. Here is a *paul*. Now run as fast as you can, and come back to me here. I will open the door in the meantime, if anybody comes. And if the Signora Marietta returns, I will tell her what you have gone for. Off with you!"

And if Marietta had returned before the boy came back, the Gobbo would have told her that seeing a flask of superior wine on the table, placed there evidently for her venerable uncle, he had been anxious to get some of the same for his father, who needed a glass of good wine; and he would still have

trusted to chance for the surreptitious accomplishment of his design of removing the poisoned flask, and replacing it by the other. If, however, he should not be able to contrive this, then he would be obliged to confide to the Signora Marietta the entire truth. For of course, in any way, he had no intention of suffering the old man to swallow the potion prepared for him by the Canon of San Lorenzo.

As it was, however, his messenger returned with the quarter flask of wine before Marietta had come home. The boy gave it him at the door, and leaving him to rejoin his friends in Sebastian's room, vanished into the little kitchen. Whereupon the Gobbo lost not a moment in substituting the newly-purchased flask for that which stood by the side of old Canon Giacomo's plate.

He then returned to Nanni and Sebastian, and merely said that as soon as he had heard the Canon of San Lorenzo go away, he had come out of the closet by the door opening into the entrance hall, and seeing a flask of wine specially placed for the old gentleman, had asked the boy to run and procure him a sample of the same for his father's use.

"Yes," said Sebastian, "my uncle needs at his time of life a glass of really good wine,—the true old man's milk, you know, Signor Boccanera. I hope it may suit your father. I believe it is one of the best growths of the Casentino."

"In that case I think I ought to know something about it," put in Nanni; "I know every vineyard in the Casentino, and I should like to see what sort of stuff it is. But why didn't you tell me, *amico mio*, that you were looking out for some good wine. I could have helped you to it."

"A thousand thanks! 'gnor Nanni," said the Gobbo, still clutching the flask in his hand; "but I should not have dreamed of troubling you for so small a matter. When I want a dozen *some** or so of genuine Casentino growth, then perhaps I may take advantage of your kindness."

"But you see, the thing is," returned Nanni, "that when once the wine gets into your Florentine cellars, it seldom comes out again just as it went in. Let me taste a mouthful of what you have got there. I should like to see what sort of stuff it is."

But the Gobbo clutched his little flask tighter than ever, and was for a moment rather at a loss what to say to his future brother-in-law. To let him taste the wine was of course out of the question. Who knew how potent might be the drug he had seen put into it?

"At home, 'gnor Nanni," he said at last, "I shall have the pleasure of taking a glass with you. Here, without giving trouble to Il Signor Conte, we have no glass . . . . and . . . ."

"*Che!* we don't make so much fuss about tasting a flask of wine in the country. Give me the flask. I will put my lips to it, and one mouthful will soon tell me what it is."

"But, 'gnor Nanni," said the poor little man, hesitating and colouring up, "I don't know . . . . . to tell the truth . . . . You must excuse me . . . . The fact is, my dear father is sometimes very particular . . . . very odd, and he might not like to see that his flask of wine had been tasted."

* *Soma*, an ass's or horse's load; *i.e.*, two barrels, one slung on either side. Each barrel contains twenty flasks, of seven pounds weight of wine each. This is legal Tuscan wine measure.

"Odd indeed! *per Bacco!*" rejoined Nanni, staring with great surprise; "well! say no more about it; I only wanted to serve you."

"I am quite sure of that, 'gnor Nanni," said the Gobbo, much distressed, and looked a telegram to his friend to take their leave, as he added, "I will explain to you . . . . you will understand that . . . . my reason is . . . ."

And so the two brothers-in-law *in posse* took their leave of the composer, promising to call on him again soon, "as soon," whispered Nanni, "as I have any word to bring you from her, which will not be long."

When they had reached the street, and were walking towards the Boccanera's home, while the Gobbo carried his jealously-guarded flask beneath his cloak, Nanni broke out; "I say, friend Sandro! why the devil would you not let me taste the wine? You said you would explain. What is the meaning of it?"

"So I will explain, my dear friend," replied the Gobbo, after a silence of a minute or two, during which he rapidly determined on his course of action—"so I will explain, but not now. On the contrary, I own to you that there is a mystery in the matter of the greatest interest. But you must allow me to keep it a mystery, 'gnor Nanni, for a little while. Be very sure meanwhile that it is no part of the mystery that my dear father would not be too proud to give you a glass from his flask, if it was the last he was ever to drink. But you remember our promise, my dear friend! We are to help one another on all occasions, I with the head, and you as the man of action. And I want your help now, 'gnor Nanni; I want it very badly. And I must ask you to do

what I want of you, without asking why or wherefore, on my solemn promise that all the mystery shall be revealed to you before long, and that you will approve of what I am doing."

"*Misericordia!*" exclaimed Nanni, utterly amazed; "does Caterina know the mystery, Sandro?"

"Not a word! Nor shall I say a word to her about it."

"Has it anything to do with her?"

"Nothing at all!"

"And may I tell her about it, when you tell me?"

"Yes! then you may tell her everything."

"Well then, I'm content, if it's nothing very terrible you want of me," said Nanni with an air of resignation. "What must I do?"

"The first thing, 'gnor Nanni, is much more disagreeable for me to ask than for you to do. I am not in the habit of asking such things from anybody, and you may conclude that the object which drives me to it is urgent. I require twenty *pauls* this day. It is a small sum; but it so happens that I have not so much by me, and cannot get it without being asked questions that I cannot answer. Will you lend it to me?"

"*Che c'è da far tanti discorsi!*"* cried Nanni, taking a couple of dollars from his pocket; "if that is all, it is easily done, and most welcome."

"But it is not all, my dear friend. We must go and lay the money out in more of the same wine, that I have here in my hand. In truth, I could do that by myself, but I need your help for what is to come afterwards."

* "What is the need of making so many words about it?"

"*Santa Madonna!* Have you lost your senses, Sandro, about this blessed wine, that you won't let me taste? Why, man alive, if you want a barrel of good old wine for Maestro Simone, do you think I should not have pleasure in sending up a *soma* to Caterina's father, let alone any other motive?—and a better sample, I'll go bail, than what you can get at a Florentine retailer's."

"Dear Signor Nanni! you are very good. But that would not serve the purpose. We must buy a few flasks of the same wine at the Albizi cellar; and we must get a number of quarter flasks, just like this one, and put all the wine into them."

"Well!" rejoined Nanni after a pause, during which an expression of complete stupefaction and inanity had been creeping over his face; "if I can guess what you have got into that long head of yours, I am a Saint! It can't be," he added dubiously, "that you have gone out of your senses all of a sudden, eh?"

"No! trust me, Nanni, I am quite in my senses. And remember that it is all to be explained to you before long."

"But shall I understand it, when it is explained to me? for I doubt it!" remonstrated Nanni.

"Oh yes! you will without any difficulty at all. But now let us go after the wine. And when we have bought it, I must bring it home two flasks at a time under my cloak; and you must keep Caterina engaged, so that I can get it into my own room without being seen by anybody. My father will be at the shop."

"Ay! that part of the job I'll do for you with all my heart, 'gnor Sandro. But I never knew that you

were a man who cared about wine," added Nanni, somewhat gravely. "It is an ugly habit drinking wine on the sly in one's own room."

"Signor Nanni, *a chi lo dice?* * Be re-assured. I shall never put my lips to a drop of the wine."

"Well! if you aren't enough to puzzle a priest! I don't believe I shall ever understand what you're up to! Any way, I'll be as good as my word. Come along, *caro mio*, let's buy the wine, if it is to be done."

So the wine was bought; and then the Gobbo carried it, a couple of flasks at a time, and safely deposited it in his own little room, while Nanni was quite as good as his word in keeping Caterina so engaged, as to prevent her from observing or interfering with her brother's movements.

Then the Gobbo proceeded to find a number of quarter flasks just like that one he had removed from the Canon Lunardi's table. These he bought, and carried similarly to his room; promising himself to do the necessary decanting work from the large flasks into the little ones, that night.

When he had done all this, he went into the sitting room where Nanni and Caterina were, and said, with an air of extreme business-like authority:

"Caterina, my sister; may I pray you to retire for a short space to your room? I have to speak to Signor Nanni on important business, which cannot conveniently be deferred."

"Why, what is in the wind now, Sandro? There never was such a one as you for having secrets; but your secrets are never worth knowing, that's

* "To whom do you say it?"

one comfort! I'll go; and I won't even listen at the door to overhear you! *A rivederci*, Signor Nanni!"

"What aren't the secrets all over yet, *caro mio?*" said honest Nanni, half cross at having been so interrupted in his previous occupation. "Surely you can't have brought all the wine home yet?"

"Indeed I have, 'gnor Nanni, and the quarter flasks too, as like as two peas to that I saw on the Canon's table."

"But why should they be alike? Don't dry up my soul* by talking to me of what you do not mean me to understand. It is quite enough to understand what is meant to be understood. Now! what's to be done next in this blind man's game?"

"Only one thing more, 'gnor Nanni; and believe me you will not only understand it all, but entirely approve of all I have done."

"Well! what's the next move in the dark?"

"Nothing more to be done to-day. But every day for some time to come, beginning with to-morrow, a watch must be kept on the apartments of the old *Canonico*, at the same hour of the day that we were there;—say from eleven till about half-past twelve; and if his Reverence the Canon Guidi goes there at that hour, I must have notice of it directly. I can keep the watch myself, say four days in the week. But I could not well be absent from the shop and from home every day. It would lead to remark. Therefore, my dear Nanni, I must ask you to help me. I know it is imposing a trouble and a bore on you. And all I can say is, that the object really is a

* "*Non mi seccate l' anima*," a common form of expression for "don't bore me."

very important one; and that you will assuredly approve afterwards of all that has been done."

"I must watch the Palazzo Lunardi, and give you notice if the Canon Guidi goes there between eleven and half-past twelve in the morning. Is that it?"

"Precisely!"

"Well! It's all very mysterious, and very like walking in the dark. But as I have begun, and given you my promise, I will go through with it, and do your bidding. But I shall expect, *amico mio*, that the upshot will show that there was some real sense in all this mystery-making; or else I shall not let you lead me a dance in the dark again."

"I am content that you should say more than that, Signor Sandro! If you do not find that there is sense, and good sense, and, as I said before, a sense that you will fully approve of, in all that I am doing and asking you to do, why then never be led by me again, never put any trust in me again, and set me down for a busybody and an ass!"

"Very well! we'll play out the play this time at all events; because, you see, Sandro, I *have* great confidence in your sense. You have been absent from the shop to-day. I will take the duty of watching the house to-morrow, from eleven till half-past twelve; and if the Canon Guidi enters, I am to let you know?"

"To let me know with the least loss of time possible. I will take care not to be absent from the shop."

"Would it do, if I found somebody to keep watch for me, who would come and tell you directly? It is rather a bore having to stand there in the street for an hour and a half!"

"A very great bore, 'gnor Nanni! and I wish I could take it on my own hands altogether. But I am afraid I must ask you to do it yourself. I cannot trust any one else. You don't know all that depends on it. It is a question of . . . . I must say no more at present. But believe me you would never forgive yourself, if anything were to go amiss by reason of a failure in any part of my plans."

"*Misericordia!* *Are* you in your right senses, Sandro? *Are* you, though, for certain? I declare you frighten me. Your plans . . . . buying wine . . . . and watching houses . . . . and I should never forgive myself if anything was to go wrong! I'll be shot if my head don't go round with it all. Well! any way my part is simple. If that priest of San Lorenzo enters the apartment of the Canonico Lunardi, any time between eleven and half-past twelve to-morrow, you shall know the fact at the Ponte Vecchio within five minutes afterwards. Will that do?"

"That is it exactly. And I am so grateful to you, dear Signor Nanni, for trusting to me. You will not repent it."

So the watch on the old Canon's house having been thus settled, the two queerly-matched friends parted.

Of course the reader comprehends that the necessity of maintaining this watch arose from the probability that the Rev. Guido Guidi might repeat the operation, in which the Gobbo had seen him engaged. In which case, it would become necessary again to defeat it, by the same means which had been used on the first occasion.

If the English reader will persist in thinking that

it would have been far simpler and easier to "give information" at the Florentine Bow Street, I can only say that he has a very imperfect conception, not only of the manner in which the spies and rogues, who in those days stood in the place of a police in Tuscany, were in the habit of managing their affairs, but also of the peculiarities of the Italian, and especially of the Florentine character and habits of thought;—a character and habits of thought doubtless formed, as regards such matters, by the nature of the rule under which they lived.

The Gobbo has lived to see a very different order of things prevail in Italy and in Tuscany. But men rarely can free themselves from habits of thought which have been the familiar furniture of their minds for half a century or more. And the Gobbo to the present day looks back on the manner in which he managed the "delicate" affair—that is his epithet—in question, as a masterpiece of prudence and judgment.

CHAPTER IX.

DEMETRIO GAZZINI, SEMPLICISTA.

THE Canon Guidi, it will be remembered, had promised on going away without seeing Marietta, on the morning of the 27th of November, to call in the afternoon of the next day. Nanni therefore watched in vain for him in the morning. As soon as ever the stipulated time was accomplished he started off to the Ponte Vecchio to report the result to the Gobbo.

"So far so good!" said the latter; "to-morrow I will undertake the job myself. We shall see."

"I hope we shall!" said Nanni; "for at present I see nothing at all. Are you going home to dinner now?"

"Why no! not directly. I have a little bit of business to attend to."

"Because I was going to say I would walk with you and say a word to Caterina. I think I deserve that, after standing like a sentry on a post for an hour and a half."

"Well! go you by yourself, 'gnor Nanni. Two to one you will find her alone. My father will have eaten his mouthful and gone off to the *café*. If not, he will be delighted to see you."

"I think I will go then," said Nanni. "May I tell Caterina how I have been passing my morning?"

"*Che!* not a word. We should neither of us have a moment of peace till we had told her everything."

"That would be hard upon me, anyway, seeing that I know nothing."

"Best say nothing about the matter then; and, Signor Nanni, have the kindness to tell La Caterina that I shall be home for a bit of dinner in half-an-hour. *A rivederci.*"

Nanni went off to indemnify himself by a pleasant hour for the disagreeable one he had passed hanging about the entrance to the Palazzo Lunardi; and as soon as his back was turned, the Gobbo, having first put on his cloak, took from a little cupboard under his work-table,—hiding it under his cloak from the eyes of the boy, who alone remained in the shop at that hour,—the flask which he had carried off from the Canon's table.

A cloak is a garment of indispensable utility in a land of poor gentility, such as Italy was for so many generations—taking rank indeed almost as an essential social institution among a people much engaged in keeping up appearances under difficulties, which necessitates the concealment of many things under a decorous exterior. How many deficiencies of toilet are hidden, how many derogatory occupations performed, beneath the cover of the all-sheltering cloak. How many an historically named Marchese, far too noble to work and far too poor to marry, duly entitled to wear all sorts of decorations at his button-hole, if only he could find the button-hole to wear them at, has reached his garret beneath the tiles of the palace built by his ancestors; and

on carefully doffing and hanging up the cherished cloak, emerged from beneath its friendly shelter in a tattered old jacket, with his dinner on a skewer in one hand. For a social system which has seen better days there is no garment like the cloak.

The Gobbo Boccanera had perhaps fallen too far, poor fellow, from the condition of his noble ancestors, to have cared much about carrying a flask openly in his hand through the streets of Florence, had the purpose in hand not been a secret one on other grounds. But as it was, he was very glad to conceal the little flask beneath his cloak, as he proceeded with it from the Ponte Vecchio to a queer dark little shop in the dark little street which runs parallel with the Arno on the southern side between the Ponte Vecchio and the Ponte Santa Trinita. There seemed to be hardly anything in the shop, save a few queer-shaped bottles and a bundle or two of dried plants; and over the door of it was written, "Demetrio Gazzini, Semplicista;" a *Semplicista*, or dealer in simples, being a trade not yet wholly driven out of the world in Florence by that of the modernised apothecary, and requiring, or supposed to require, some knowledge of botany and its kindred sciences in the professor of it.

This Demetrius, the Simplicist—who had chosen this humble calling rather because it permitted him to ramble about the country and live a desultory life after his own fashion, in a manner which would have been incompatible with any regular exercise of the medical profession, than because he could not have duly qualified himself for the latter, for which he had been intended, had he chosen to do so,—this Demetrius was an old friend and school-mate of the

Gobbo. He was all alone in his little den of a back-shop looking on to the river, eating a dinner which seemed perfectly in keeping with his character as a Simplicist, or dealer in herbs, when Sandro entered.

"Look you here, *Demetrio mio*," said he, after they had exchanged a word or two, producing the flask, "I want a turn of your skill. You must find out for me what this flask contains, and ask no questions, and say no word of me or my flask to anybody. I know I can trust you, and you know you can trust me."

"All right, Sandro! hand over the flask. It looks to me as if this would be a very appropriate mode of ascertaining the contents of it," said the Semplicista, raising the flask to his mouth as he spoke.

"No!" rejoined the Gobbo, laying his hand on the other's arm, "I have too great a regard for you to let you discover an answer to my question in any such way. Does the smell say anything?"

"The smell is strongly in favour of my method of analysis," said Demetrius. "I should say a clear case of as capital a flask of Chianti as I ever met with."

"A diagnosis extremely creditable to your accurate knowledge of simples of one kind at least!" returned Sandro. "Nevertheless we will, if you please, inquire a little further into the matter. Have you the means of ascertaining whether any and what substance may have been added to this wine?"

"That depends on what the substance may be, friend Sandro. If anything of a mineral nature have been used to tamper with it, I shall probably have little difficulty in detecting it. But if you

have any reason to suspect anything, you must not conclude that the wine is all right because I fail to detect anything."

"Very good! when can you give me the result of your trial?"

"Look in this evening as you come from the shop. I'll see to it."

"*A rivederci dunque, stasera.*"*

In the afternoon of that day the Canon of San Lorenzo paid the visit he had promised to Casa Lunardi. The Canon Giacomo was absent at vespers, whither he had been accompanied by Sebastian. So Marietta was alone.

"I was sorry to have missed you yesterday, Guido! but I thought you must have remembered that it was the festival of *Il Beato Leonardo*, and that I never miss the function in the family chapel on that day. It is one of the very few and very small marks of respect for the memory of my forefathers which I am yet able to pay."

She spoke in a dreary, utterly dispirited and cold manner, in the tones of which the practised ear of so acute an observer as the Reverend Guido Guidi did not fail to detect a certain degree of alienation in the speaker's mind as regarded himself.

"I had not forgotten it, Marietta. I am not in the habit of forgetting things that interest you nearly. But I hoped you might have been home from the church a few minutes earlier. I was not able to come at any other hour yesterday."

"Your stay at Rome has been as short as your departure was sudden."

* "Adieu, then, till this evening."

"Yes, happily. I am very anxious to have the little work on which I am engaged printed by the end of the year. I came upon a difficult point in the matter,—a point which indeed has never been finally decided by the Church; and I was very desirous of consulting some of my learned friends at Rome, especially the Superior of the Jesuits, upon the subject. A few hours' conversation was all that was needed."

"It seems a small need to have required so great an exertion as a journey express to Rome. Was it not possible to consult the learned theologians in question by letter?"

"As to the exertion, Marietta, he who aims at reputation must never even stay to count it. And as for your other suggestion, there are points on which I might be able to obtain the sense of men in whose judgment I have confidence, but on which they might not be willing to commit themselves by giving their opinion in writing."

"A bolder manifestation of opinion might be more calculated to win respect for the opinion held."

"Prudence is a great virtue, Marietta," retorted the priest sarcastically. "But I want to ask you about your venerable uncle. How has he been while I have been away?"

"As usual, dear old man! well and cheerful as ever."

"The most trying season to old persons is now at hand. A generous diet is more than ever necessary for them in weather which makes demands even upon the reserved forces of the young. Does he retain his appetite?"

"Yes, indeed! I see no change in him."

"And take his wine? Nothing is more important to a man of his age than a modicum of really good and generous wine."

"I am sure of it. And we make a point of getting him the best we can. He has his separate flask at dinner every day."

"What quantity does he take?"

"The fourth part of a flask as regularly as possible. A quarter-flask is always put on the table, and he always finishes it."

"Yes! that is enough, and not too much. And he always gets to the bottom of it?"

"Oh yes! his habits in such things are as regular as clockwork, dear uncle Giacomo! And I can declare, Guido," continued Marietta, suddenly changing her tone and manner, "with my hand on my heart, and as if I were standing before the judgment seat of God—I can declare, that to the best of my power and ability, I have neglected nothing which can contribute to the old man's comfort and well-being."

"Why should any such solemn protest be needed on such a subject, my dear friend? Although we have talked over the circumstances, that might seem to make it desirable that your uncle's life should not be prolonged, we came to the conclusion, that the issues of life and death were matters that must be left entirely in the hands of Providence. As far as we can see at present, it does seem as if the decease of the Canon within the next few months could alone enable you to attain the aim of your entire life. To us it does undoubtedly seem so! But God only knows. We must be content to leave the matter in his Hands. He will shape the result as in his

wisdom He shall find best. Let us await it with what patience we may."

"I strive to do so, Guido. And I rejoice, that you yourself should have come to such a frame of mind."

"I never, I hope, was in any other frame of mind, Marietta. Perhaps you do not separate with sufficient accuracy the domain of conduct from that of speculation. The latter cannot be too free;—I had almost said too lawless. The former is ruled by far severer laws."

And Marietta, feeling that she did not above half comprehend the general proposition, which the priest was laying down, was inclined to imagine, that she must have been in error in supposing him to have, on a former occasion, intended to convey a meaning, which had haunted her with so horrible an obsession, and against which she had struggled so fearfully.

And now she trembled with the violence of her emotion, as the priest so easily and placidly spoke of its appearing desirable that her uncle's life should not be prolonged! Yes! it was easy for him to speak in the calm stock phrases of religion on the subject. His life had not been dedicated to one sole dear hope, now being wrecked under his eyes, as the post was all but gained! How could she avoid wishing anxiously for her uncle's death? As for the idea of raising a murderous hand against his life, that had been banished, she said to herself, with a sufficiency of reprobation. But the other horror remained. And how could she clear her heart and conscience of the hideous thought?

The Canon Guidi, however, had attained the real object of his visit. He had in the first place ascertained, as he supposed, that the poisoned wine had

been all drunk by the intended victim, and that he might safely calculate on subsequent doses being equally consumed. He had been anxious also to know, whether any effect on the old Canon's health had already made itself observable. He was in entire ignorance as to the mode of operation of the poison, further than that it was warranted to do its office in the time specified. But he was not at all surprised at finding that no perceptible result had as yet followed the exhibition of it. After a few minutes more conversation with Marietta, and a few devout expressions of a hope, that things might be so ordered by a merciful Providence as to bring about the fulfilment of her pious wish and object in God's good time and season, he left her. And the thought that was in his mind, as he descended the stairs from the third floor, was, that if the catastrophe, be it how it might, were to be delayed much longer, and the present state of suspense and struggle in Marietta's mind be prolonged, the finale would be her death before that of her octogenarian uncle.

For in truth Marietta was terribly changed. And the Canon's absence for more than a week made the change more noticeable to him, than it had been before. She stooped habitually, and was apt to press one hand against her side as she walked. Her broad and finely developed chest had become flat and sunken between her shoulders. Her cheeks were hollow, and their former statuesque whiteness was changed for a settled hectic patch of pink. Her large dark eyes seemed more lustrous than ever; but they were sunken beneath the finely marked black eyebrow; and an anxious craving expression, at once haggard and restless, shot out from the depths

of them. The twofold agony of seeing the cherished hope of her life, for which she had laboured and suffered so much, snatched from her when it seemed all but within her grasp, and of knowing that the only thing, which could avail to prevent this was the death of one she loved so truly and reverentially,—of having this nightmare conviction constantly before her mind with that clear unavoidable perception of it, which Guidi had taken such cruel care to set before her, was playing sad havoc with both mind and body. Had her heart and conscience allowed her to admit and acquiesce in the acknowledged hope, that the winter might end a life, necessarily on its utmost verge, in time for the accomplishment of her aim, her state of mind would have been less dreadful. There would still have been the torturing suspense, the keen anxiety, all the horror of watching the old man's face from day to day in the hope of seeing in it the signs of ailing. And in such a programme there was surely misery enough. But as the case stood with her, there was the dreadful unceasing struggle not to hope for the only means to that end, which she hoped so fervently;—the determination not to wish for the old man's death;—the continual, ever-renewed morbid examination of her heart, to ascertain whether any such hideous feeling lurked there;—the self-loathing that the suspicion of its latent presence caused her;—the impotency of all this struggle to remove any portion of the strong ever-abiding consciousness that the great end, was desired by her with a fierce and consuming desire. There was too much reason to fear, that the "Thy will, not mine be done," which came so frequently and with such fervid force from her lips, as

she knelt in the solitude of her chamber, or of the chapel in the neighbouring church, was accompanied by an unavowed proviso, lurking at the bottom of her heart, and harboured there almost without the connivance of her consciousness, to the effect, that the divine will invoked with such efforts at sincerity, was to be somehow or other not incompatible with the ultimate restoration of Palazzo Lunardi to its ancient owners. It is in such cases that the human heart is indeed desperately deceitful.

That evening on quitting the shop on the Ponte Vecchio, the Gobbo returned, as had been arranged, to his friend the Simplicist.

"I've quite changed my mind as to the proper manner of testing your wine, friend Sandro!" said the latter, as the Gobbo entered the dusky and unfurnished little room, which the poor herb-dealer called his shop; "*Per Bacco!* I should be sorry to put my mouth to your flask!"

"You've detected the poison then?" replied the Gobbo eagerly.

"Quite enough to make me very careful to have nothing to do with *that* vintage. But to tell you the truth, the job you gave me was rather too difficult a one for my small chemical appliances. I cannot undertake to say what there is in that flask; or rather to say what there may not be in it. I have detected the presence of more than one poisonous mineral substance. But there are other ingredients, which I do not understand; and which it would require a far better analysis than I can make to ascertain the nature of. But if all you want to know is, whether that wine has been poisoned or not, I can tell you without any doubt about it. It is no

mere case of doctoring. The wine has been intentionally poisoned; and my belief is, by some carefully prepared and highly composite drug."

"*Basta!* That is sufficient knowledge of the matter for me; and I am much obliged to you, *Demetrio mio;*" returned the Gobbo; "I had very strong reason to believe that the wine was poisoned; and as to its being a highly composite poison, that is likely enough too; for it is a highly composite villain who has done it."

"Well, but you will take care, I suppose," said the Simplicist, putting the flask, which he had carefully sealed, into his friend's hand, with some little hesitation in his manner, "you will be responsible that no mischief comes from that cursed flask. There is no smell to warn one, and I should think probably no bad taste. Anybody might drink it."

"Make yourself easy, my friend; you know you may trust me. And if poor Sandro Boccanera had not had his eyes somewhat wider open than other folks, this flask of poison would at this hour have been doing its work in a Christian man's intestines. You have sealed the flask, I see. That is good! Give it to me! I will take good care of it, I promise you."

And so the Gobbo carried the guilty flask carefully home under his cloak, and placed it in the same little safe cupboard with the other (unsealed) flasks which he had that morning purchased and prepared.

On the next day the Gobbo kept watch himself on Casa Lunardi for the hour and a half, which he calculated might possibly elapse between the preparation of the table for the old Canon Giacomo's dinner, and the time at which he sat down at it.

And his watch was as fruitless as that of Nanni on the preceding day. No Canon of San Lorenzo hove in sight. On the day after, Nanni loyally mounted guard, though not without some murmuring to himself, that the Gobbo, wise as he was, should not lead him into such a fool's errand another time, unless he succeeded in giving a very satisfactory reason for all his mysterious doings on the present occasion.

On the Saturday the Gobbo was on the watch, with a quarter flask of wine ready under his cloak, when the magnificent Canon of San Lorenzo walked up to the door of Palazzo Lunardi, about ten minutes before the dinner hour of the family on the third floor.

"Oh ho! Now for the second dose!" thought the Gobbo.

He allowed the Canon to pass up the staircase, without having observed him; and then following at the distance of one flight of stairs, he hid his flask behind a statue in a niche at the angle of the second flight, and joined the Canon at the door of the Lunardi's apartment, before it had been opened to him.

"I have the honour of wishing your Reverence good morning," said the Gobbo with a profound bow.

"Good morning, Signor Boccanera! Are you about to visit our friends here?"

"That is my purpose, Signor Canonico. The Lady Marietta is kind enough to permit me to see her occasionally, to speak of some subjects of enquiry in which we take a common interest."

"Indeed!" said the dignified priest, somewhat superciliously, as the door was opened, and the two visitors entered together,

They found the Signora Marietta in the sitting-room. The table was duly prepared for dinner, and the little flask was in its place by the side of the old Canon's plate. But he had not yet come out from his room, and Sebastian was at work in his own chamber.

"I called chiefly," said the priest, taking up his usual place with his back to the fire-place, without sitting down, "to ask after our aged friend. The days are getting very cold. How does he stand it?"

"Oh! perfectly! I don't think he feels the cold at all. He will be here in a minute, and you will see him looking as well as one could wish."

Guidi fixed a cold, hard look on Marietta, as she said this, which caused the blood to rush painfully into her face, and tingle in her veins. But she had spoken with sincerity;—at least she had intended to do so; and did with all the sincerity she could. The Gobbo would have been likely enough to observe the priest's look and the result it produced, had he not kept his eyes fixed on the flask on the table. It seemed as if he feared that the dangerous priest of San Lorenzo might convey his deadly drug into the flask even before his eyes, if he took them a moment off it. But Guidi remained standing on the hearth at a safe distance from the table.

"I wanted to tell you, Signora, of some notices of the elder branch of the Cerchi family, which I happened to come upon the other day;" said the Gobbo to Marietta, who had received him courteously. "But if your ladyship is engaged at present . . . ." he continued, slightly bowing towards the priest.

"Perhaps we *could* talk of it more conveniently,

at some other time," said poor Marietta, who although no interview between her and Guidi ever passed without occasioning her many a heart stab, and increased subsequent trouble of mind, yet had a nervous restless craving for his visits, as those of the only human being to whom she could speak of all that was filling her heart and brain. "I should take great interest in the subject you speak of some other day," she added.

But the Gobbo did not get up from his chair, nor manifest any signs of going. Though the last man in the world to be slow to obey such a hint on any other occasion, nothing short of force could have expelled him from that room, just then, until either the younger Canon should have left it, or the older Canon have drunk his daily flask of wine. He was a good deal embarrassed, however, how to keep his ground; and his manner seemed the stranger to Marietta from his not looking at her as he spoke, but keeping his eyes constantly fixed on the dinner table.

After a little hesitation, he said: "If the Signora Contessa will permit me, I will stay a minute to pay my respects to the Rev. Signor Canonico Giacomo, since he will be here so shortly. It is some time since I have had the honour of kissing his hand; and it is one, which I think much of."

The Canon Guidi and Marietta glanced at each other, the former with an undisguised look of contempt and aversion on his handsome lip, the latter with a wan cheerless smile, and an almost imperceptible shrug of the shoulder. And a minute afterwards the Canon said:

"I will wish you a good morning then, Signora,

since I cannot have the pleasure of speaking with you on the subject we had to converse on. Perhaps another time, I may be more fortunate."

And so saying he stalked out of the room, without vouchsafing the slighest salutation to the poor Gobbo. Sandro was much distressed, ... but there stood the old gentleman's flask of wine, as good as when it came from the cellar, and he had the satisfaction of thinking that he had out-generalled his magnificent and formidable adversary. Beyond this satisfaction however, his trouble and strategy had been needless. For the Canon had not come that day with any felonious intent. The week had not elapsed since the administration of the first dose, and if the Gobbo could only have known the directions that had been given in the lone house at Rome together with the packet of powders, he might have limited his watch to once a week.

As soon as the Canon was gone, Sandro felt that he might venture to take his eyes off the flask on the table. Raising them accordingly to the face of the lady Marietta, he was struck by the expression of illness and suffering so legible there.

"I fear, Signora Contessa," he said, "that your ladyship is suffering. I pray you to ascribe the liberty I take to the great regard and respect I have always felt for your noble family and yourself; but in truth this winter does not seem to have set in favourably for your ladyship. Assuredly you are not well, and I supplicate you to take care of yourself."

"In fact, my good Sandro, I am not well! I have suffered much of late. I have had much trouble and anxiety. We all have at one time or other, and

must each bear his burthen as best he may. *Basta!* What was it you were going to say to me?"

The Gobbo in reply was beginning to trump up some story about the subject he had mentioned,—no difficult task to him, stored as his memory was with such matters,—when he was saved the trouble by the entrance of the old Canon.

In him Sandro's quick eye could detect no such signs of ill-health, as were but too plain in the face of his niece. The old man, more than half-way between eighty and ninety, seemed as hearty and as cheery as ever.

"Have you had a good sleep, uncle?" asked Marietta, rising to meet him.

"Ay! my child! I have slept well, and am ready to eat well, and drink well. I fear, my Marietta," he added, tenderly taking her hand between both of his, "that you cannot say as much for yourself. Your hand is hot and dry. I fear, my darling, that you are suffering!—Signor Sandro, good day to you. How goes the world with you and yours?"

"We have nothing to complain of, your Reverence, thank God! I made bold to await your Reverence's rising from your siesta to pay my respects, and ask after your health."

"I have nothing to complain of, God knows, and God be thanked, not even of my six and eighty years. I only wish my Marietta carried her two score as lightly as I do my four score."

And so after a few more words of mutual courtesy, the Gobbo "removed the inconvenience,"* as he said in his Tuscan idiom, and took his leave.

* "*Levo l' incommodo*" is a common mode of ceremonious leave-taking.

The following Wednesday was the 4th of December, and was the day week, from the date of the first poisoning of the Canon's wine. And it is probable that the priest of San Lorenzo had selected that day for his weekly operation, as besides the especial function on St. Leonard's day, Marietta was in the habit of attending a short morning service at eleven o'clock on every Wednesday. On that day accordingly, the Gobbo again chancing to be on duty as watchman, shortly after eleven saw the Canon of St. Lorenzo enter the Palazzo.

On this occasion the Gobbo did not follow him up the staircase. He also knew that Marietta was absent, and he determined to await till he came down, thinking it probable, that he would do his errand and quit the house without waiting for her return, as he had done on the previous occasion. Should he be disappointed in this, and should the Contessa return before Guidi left the palace, he would then go up with the pretext of giving her a paper of notes on the Cerchi genealogy, with which he had specially prepared himself, in case of needing such an excuse. It turned out however as he had expected. After having been upstairs a very short time, the Canon returned, and left the house, and no sooner was he round the first corner, than the Gobbo ran up the stairs, and taking the flask of wine from behind the statue, where he had left it safely ensconced since his last visit; and telling the boy at the door, that he thought he had dropped a paper in the *loggia* the last time he had been at the house, and would be glad to see if he could find it there, stepped quickly through the sitting-room, through the window on to the *loggia*, returned

through the room, and while the boy was closing the window, deftly changed the flasks as before, and carried off that which had been intended for the Canon beneath his cloak.

Another visit to his friend the Simplicist produced the certainty that his flask had been dealt with in the same manner as the previous one. It was accordingly sealed as that had been, and consigned to the same place of safe keeping.

Of course after this the watch was not slackened. It is needless to detail the different little stratagems, to which the Gobbo had recourse to accomplish his purpose. It is sufficient to say that he successfully changed six flasks, the last of them having been removed by him on Wednesday the 1st of January, when both Marietta and the Canon were in the room. Of course if any of these little schemes had failed, or if on the latter occasion he had been seen, or had found himself unable to attempt the substitution unseen, he would have been forced to speak out, and bring forward the evidence of the flasks he had already secured. But such was not the case. Besides these six flasks, he had also carried off two flasks on days on which the Canon had visited the house during the hours of suspicion, which his friend reported to contain no poison. But these were accidents, as the Gobbo said to himself, which might happen to the most practised and competent detective. It was best to be on the safe side.

All this mystery and conspiring, crowned with the triumph of so signally outwitting that detested grand gentleman, the Canon of San Lorenzo, was a source of extreme gratification to Sandro Boccanera. He had enjoyed few weeks of his life so keenly as those

which had passed while engaged in his conflict of cunning with the priest. But the game was not an equally amusing one to poor Nanni, who had to play it blindfold. And a good deal of coaxing, and a great many assurances had been needed to induce him to continue his part in the Gobbo's arrangements.

Poor Nanni was uncomfortable and anxious on another matter. He had screwed up his courage to write to his father of his matrimonial projects; and had received in reply only a very short letter from the *Fattore,* saying that he purposed being in Florence a few days after the *Capo d' anno.**

It was now therefore time to expect him, and Nanni was looking to his arrival with no little alarm and misgiving. It was on the morning of the 3rd of January, that the burly *Fattore,* very blue with the cold, very hungry, and very cross, presented himself at his son's lodging, just as the latter was on the point of leaving it to go to his breakfast.

* Head of the year, *i.e.*, New Year's Day.

CHAPTER X.

WHAT CATERINA COULD DO, WHICH LAURA COULD NOT DO.

POURING out a torrent of welcome, and making the greatest possible demonstration of his delight at seeing his father in Florence, Nanni induced him with some difficulty to come into the house, he was on the point of leaving, and upstairs to the room he occupied. But when they had reached the little bed-room on the third floor, with its bed, washing-stand, two chairs, and bare walls, the burly farmer's wrath broke out.

"Well! I do say,—as I have said to others, I say it to you to your face, Nanni, you are the most undutiful, the most . . . . abominable . . . . the most cruel and unfeeling son that ever an unfortunate father was cursed with!"

"Oh! father! don't say so! I am sure when you come to know her . . . ."

"Her! indeed!" roared the *Fattore;* "you can think of nothing but yourself and your own affairs, you selfish wretch! Is this the way you receive your father, when he has come through ice and snow to see you?" and he looked round the room as he stood in the middle of it, as if it presented the liveliest

picture of the abomination of desolation. "Where were you going, sirrah, when I met you at the door?"

"I was going to the *café* to get my breakfast, father;" faltered poor Nanni.

"Ay! you can think of your own breakfast!" sneered his father with intense bitterness; "but whether your poor old father is starved, or frozen, or both together, you care little."

"Will you come with me to the *café* then, father?"

"*Café!* Are you mocking me, sirrah! *Café!* after such a journey as I have had over the Consuma!"

Nanni thought he saw a gleam of light in the darkness of the prospect before him. At all events he perceived the only means, which might perhaps mend the threatening aspect of matters. And suddenly an idea dashed into his head, which he hoped might possibly even turn the paternal stormy weather into a favouring breeze.

"I'll tell you what, father," said he, "while you take off your coats and wash your hands I'll run and see about some breakfast for you."

"Hands be d——d!" growled his father. "It ain't my *hands* that are empty!"

"But father, come now, just make yourself comfortable, and I will be back before you can say '*Ave Maria.*'"

"Comfortable! here! I don't want to say '*Ave Maria.*' You are going to leave me in this hole, and bolt after your own breakfast, unnatural son as you are!"

"No! father, I am going after *your* breakfast."

"I'll be . . . . blessed if I breakfast here then, so now you know."

"Here! of course not. I'll be back in no time!" cried Nanni as he left the room.

"If you are not," bellowed his father after him, "I'll never speak . . . . . ."

But Nanni was already half the way down the stairs. He had great hopes, that a judicious peace-offering of creature-comforts, if presented without too great delay, might change the current of his parent's feelings. But it was not the easiest thing in the world to find in Florence the means of setting before the hungry farmer, at a very short notice, what his Casentino bred ideas would consider a very good breakfast with acceptable surrounding circumstances. No fragments of food brought up half cold on little bits of plates one after the other in the cold room of a *ristoratore* to be eaten at a wretched little table with a marble top, would serve the turn. Nor would it do to order a breakfast at an hotel, and wait an hour while the cook prepared it at his leisure, and the waiter proceeded to kindle two sticks in some desolate and unhomely looking room, as miserable as six prim straight-backed chairs, and a dirty cruet-stand flanked by two worn out plated candlesticks on a huge sideboard could make it. No! that would not do! But Nanni had his idea, and thought he saw how it might be turned to good account.

He ran as hard as he could to the house inhabited by the Boccaneras, and reached it just as the Gobbo was leaving it to follow his father, who had gone before him, to the Ponte Vecchio.

"Sandro! my dear fellow," he said quite out of breath, "I've got a mystery in hand now; and it's your turn to help and ask no questions,—at least not till there's time to answer them."

"Of course, *amico mio!* but what a hurry you are in . . . ."

"Yes! listen. My father is in Florence. I want to bring him here to breakfast. You must help me to get a right good meal. I sha'n't let him know whose house it is. You must give him the sitting room all to himself. Caterina must keep out of his way till after he has breakfasted. There is a large open hearth in your sitting room. The first thing is to make a jolly great fire there big enough to roast an ox."

"All that seems easy enough, *caro mio.* Come in, and speak to Caterina."

"Yes! but we must be very quick. You must let the shop wait for you for half an hour, and help us."

"Anything I can do. . . . . ."

And then the nature of the business in hand was explained to Caterina; as far at least as it had been explained to her brother. She was not a little alarmed at being told, that Nanni's father, on whom so much of her hopes and fears depended, and whom she had never seen, was coming to breakfast there almost immediately; and she was quite ready to agree to that part of Nanni's scheme, which required her to keep herself out of the old gentleman's sight.

Nanni urged the utmost possible speed in making their preparations. The one maid was set to heap a huge fire on the hearth, such as had not burned there for many a long year. Caterina busied herself with preparing a table in front of the fire, with a fine and spotless white cloth, and one napkin laid in front of the easy chair by the ingle nook.

"If I run and get some prime ham, do you think you can cook it in rashers here?" asked Nanni.

"That I will undertake," said the Gobbo. "You bring the ham, and in ten minutes afterwards it shall be hissing on the table in such rashers as might tempt the Pope on a Friday."

"I could get some *brocette*," added Nanni, alluding to those savoury preparations so much liked by the Florentines, which consist of a variety of tit-bits of meat, bacon, small birds, and bread, placed in inviting alternations of colour and flavour on a long skewer, with the leaves of sundry aromatic plants intercalated between each morsel.

"Yes, we can cook them too in no time. And if you like, 'gnor Nanni, Cecco Battista at the *café* close by would send you in an excellent *frittata*."

"Capital! let *La Nina* order it, and a good jorum of hot coffee at the same time. I'll run for the other things."

And Nanni was off like a shot; and very soon returned laden with paper packages, containing the ham and the *brocette*, besides some nicely sliced Bologna sausage and cold tongue, and a bit of prime Gorgonzola cheese;—materials for a breakfast fit for the Pope, as Caterina declared.

"And, Sandro," said Nanni, taking him aside, "have you any of that wine of the Albizzi cellar left? If you have, put a flask of it on the table. We can get some more afterwards."

"All right! there are five quarter flasks in the cupboard. I will get one of them."

"*One* of them! For Heaven's sake don't put a quarter flask on the table. The sight of it would spoil all. It must be a whole flask."

"Well, if it must, I'll put four of the quarters into a big flask."

"Do; we can supply the others again at leisure. And now I am off to bring him here. You will have the ham and things ready by the time I am back. Don't let him see you or *La Caterina.*"

And Nanni hurried back with all the speed he could make to his father, who did not appear to have been measuring the time of his son's absence by saying *Ave Marias*, certainly. At least, if he had, they had not produced any of the tranquillising or beneficial effects attributed to such pious employment of time.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself, to leave me shut up in this cursed dog-hole, famished with hunger and cold, while you go off to your breakfast? Don't you think it is too bad? But if I don't . . . ."

"I have not been to breakfast, father. I've been getting your breakfast," pleaded Nanni. "Come along, father, it is all ready."

"Ready! why, it's little I want, God knows. Why could you not let me have a mouthful at once, famishing as I am?"

Nanni made no reply; but led his father, grumbling to himself all the way, to the Boccanera's house, and rang the bell. The *Fattore* wondered where his son was taking him; and how any breakfast was likely to be found there. But he was too cross to ask any questions, and only growling to himself as he entered, "What the devil's sort of an *osteria** is this, I should like to know?" suffered himself to be led into the room that had been prepared for him.

He had to pass the door of the kitchen to reach this room; and that door was not quite pulled to.

* Inn, or tavern, from "*oste.*"

There was a space of about an inch between it and the door-post; and on the inside a little hand carefully held it in this position, and a pair of bright black eyes were brought to bear on the unconscious farmer as he passed. The black eyes took eager and rapid note of the face and figure of the new comer, scanning every feature and the expression of it, as a culprit in the dock may be supposed to scan the face of his judge. The result of her scrutiny was not reassuring to poor little Caterina. She saw a broad purple face under a broad-leaved whity-brown hat, screwed into an expression of intense ill-humour. The large coarse mouth had the expression of that of a bull-dog in the moment previous to his spring at the throat of his foe. There was a black scowl on the heavy corrugated brow; and on the whole the broad bluff farmer looked a man to whom every gentler feeling was unknown,—a tyrant from whom neither mercy, sympathy, nor relenting was to be expected. For the farmer was very hungry.

Poor Caterina's heart sunk within her as she looked.

"Here they are, Sandro," she said in a whisper to her brother, who was busy with his culinary operations at the fire. Are the rashers ready? Oh, me! he looks dreadfully savage. He will never never consent, Sandro, one would be a fool to think it. He as rich as a Turk too! Let *La Nina* go in with the *frittata* directly, and come back for the rashers."

But if Caterina had been able to follow the arbiter of her destiny with her eyes, into the room prepared for his entertainment, she might perhaps have seen grounds for a gleam of hope. In truth it was impossible for the eyes of a cold and hungry man to light

on a more pleasant prospect than that which greeted the cross *Fattore*, as he entered. A blazing wood fire was roaring on the capacious old-fashioned hearth. The daintily spread table looked extremely appetising, and the great chair in the corner between it and the ingle deliciously inviting.

"Humph! this looks something like!" growled the hungry man, as the savage expression of his mouth somewhat relaxed. "I am perished with cold!" he continued, as his son made him seat himself in the great chair; "and a good fire is a good thing; but one can't eat fire. Here's a bit of dry bread, any way; and that's more than I expected!" he added, cutting a crust from the loaf on the table as he spoke, and eating it ravenously.

Nanni, casting an anxious look towards the door for the appearance of the more appetising materials of the breakfast, poured out a full tumbler from the flask, and handed it to his father.

"Pretty sort of wine one is likely to get in a place of this sort," growled he, as he took the glass, which he emptied at a draught. But when he had done so, rolling his tongue in his mouth as he put the glass down, he looked hard at his son in the face, and gave three measured nods. At the same moment the servant girl entered with a large dish of steaming rashers, and an omelette or *frittata*.

"There's worse wine than that in Florence; ay, and what's more there is worse wine in the Casentino. But I always did say that much for you, Nanni, that you knew a good glass of wine when you tasted it! And here comes the girl with a brave dish of rashers. Ay, ay! juicy and tender. Why did not you tell me, Nanni, that you had a good

breakfast ready for me? You would have saved me from getting into a passion. Come, my son, you are going to breakfast with me, I hope. Come, give us your fist, and turn to; the rashers are right good, I can tell you."

So the *Fattore* and his son discussed the good things together; and presently the *brocette* were brought and drew forth a fresh eulogium from the former. Then came the coffee and a cigar; and then the old gentleman, restored to perfect good humour and feeling in charity with all men, stretched out his legs before the fire and began to think of inquiring where he was.

"Well! it is not an *osteria* of any sort, Babbo! They are some good kind people, friends of mine, and I thought they would give you a more comfortable breakfast than one could get at the *Pappagallo*."

"More comfortable, I believe you! I never had a better breakfast in my life, or saw things better done and more comfortable. Why that table-cloth and napkin there your mother would be proud to put on her table."*

"Yes! they are thrifty and comfortable people. The family consists of a widowed father, a son and daughter. It is the daughter who keeps all straight here; and a clever active body she is. But you'll guess, father, that I want to talk to you about other things. I want to speak to you, you know, about my marriage."

* There is no possession of which the Tuscans, especially the country people, think more than of a stock of linen, mostly the produce of the spinning of the good housewife and her fore-mothers; for the prized store passes from generation to generation, and is accumulated to the great pride and joy of the household, beyond all possible power of using it.

"And that's what I am come to Florence to hear, my son! Now it is all off with Laura, and shouldn't be on again with my consent,—not if Beppe Palli was to beg me on his knees,—I shall make no difficulty, so you choose a respectable girl, come of respectable people, and not quite a beggar."

"Well, father! I'll tell you more about it as we walk . . . ."

"But ought not I to say a word of thanks to these good people here. Don't let them think that a Casentino *Fattore* does not know how to behave himself."

"I fancy the father and son are both away at their business by this time. But I can see if the daughter is there," said Nanni, leaving the room.

"Is he satisfied with his breakfast, Nanni dear?" asked Caterina, eagerly, as he came into the kitchen.

"Delighted, *anima mia!* and now you must come and let him thank you for it."

"Oh, Nanni! not now!"

"Yes! now this minute. But listen, darling! he don't know a word yet about you and me."

"And are you going to tell him now?" asked Caterina in great alarm.

"I don't know! we shall see. It must depend on how things go. Come along!"

Caterina shrunk with terror from the idea of being presented to the terrible and unamiable looking old man, whose appearance she had so accurately studied through the kitchen door. But she was very agreeably surprised on entering the room, where the farmer was still sitting in the great easy chair enjoying his cigar, to find there a totally different person from the forbidding individual she had seen

enter. A more hearty, cheery, jolly, benevolent looking old gentleman than he now appeared Caterina thought she had never seen ; and she could not get over her surprise at the metamorphosis.

The farmer rose from his chair courteously, as she entered the room, and taking off his broad-leaved beaver, which in country fashion he had retained while sitting at breakfast, he said with good grace enough :

"Signorina, I do not know how to thank you sufficiently for your hospitality. Should you or any of your family ever come into the Casentino, I do hope I may have an opportunity of seeing you under the roof of old Carlo Palli, the *Fattore*, near Poppi. No difficulty in finding me."

"You are very good, sir ! I trust you found your breakfast to your liking, sir ?"

"Never enjoyed one more in all my days, my dear young lady. I make you my compliments upon your housekeeping."

"You are good to be so easily pleased, sir ; we are but poor folks."

"Poor folks ! *per Bacco !* And what sort of linen do rich folks have on their tables then, I should like to know ? *I* never saw a choicer cloth than that on a table."

"It is one of my own spinning, sir !" said Caterina, hanging down her head and blushing with pleasure, for she well knew that the excellence she was owning to was, especially in such eyes as those of her hoped-for father-in-law, the highest that a notable girl could claim.

"Ho ! ho !" cried the farmer, taking up the end of the cloth and examining it. "And this is your

spinning, is it? *Davvero! Davvero!** I compliment you upon your work, Signorina! And allow me to tell you there are worse judges of a bit of linen than Carlo Palli!"

"I think I could show you, sir, a *finimento di tavola*† finer spun and more even than that;" rejoined poor Caterina, who may surely be excused for wishing to put her little merits forward on this occasion, knowing as she did that she was on her trial for life or death.

"Ay! indeed!" returned the *Fattore;* "those must be famous little fingers! I should like to think there was a chance of your ever coming our way. But, *Santa Maria,* I dare say that you would think going to stay in the country much about as pleasant as going to Trespiano!"‡

"I! Signor Palli! I dote on the country. I should like to live in the country all the year round for my part."

"*Davvero!* well! perhaps some day we may see you on the other side of the Consuma. Pray explain to your respected father, Signorina, how much I and Nanni are beholden to him for his hospitality. *A rivederla, Signorina!*"

And so, bowing himself out, the farmer and his son went down the stairs to the street door.

"Now for this affair of thine, my son. First you must tell me all about it, and then I suppose you mean to do me the honour of presenting me to the lady."

"Yes!" said Nanni, I "shall hope to do that."

* "Truly! truly!"

† Complete service for the table, *i.e.*, cloth and napkins.

‡ The Florentine public cemetery.

"Nanni, my son, to say the truth, my mind misgives me. To give thee thy due, as I said but now, thou knowest a good sample of wine as well as any man in Tuscany. And it's a good gift,—a very good gift. But in the matter of choosing a wife I doubt me, thou art not up to the mark. There goes a deal of brains, Nanni, to the job of choosing a wife, —more than thou thinkest, lad. For if you choose them by the eye, it is like trying a beast in the stable. And put it, that you've walked 'em through the byre and looked at 'em in the field; still Nanni, my son, it's ill buying a beast till you've seen it with its yoke-fellow. How will it work under the yoke? That's the question, you see, Nanni."

"Ay, father; but you can't try the yoke on 'em before you buy, you know."

"That's just where it is, Nanni; that's why marrying needs a deal of gumption,—more, I fear me, than thou hast in thy noddle. And that's why, I say, my mind misgives me. And I've the proof that you don't know a good one when you see her, as your old father does with half an eye."

"What proof? What do you mean, father?"

"Why, there are your friends that have just given us a breakfast. Stands to reason you must know them well; wouldn't have taken me there in that way if you didn't. And there, if I don't mistake, you've passed by a good one."

"Why! how do you mean, father?" said Nanni, as unconcernedly as he could. But his heart leaped into his throat as he spoke.

"How do I mean! Why look at that lass that I was talking to a minute ago. If you had half the eye for a pretty face that your old father has, you'd

have known that she is as pretty a girl to begin with as anybody might wish to see whether in town or country. Then she knows how to keep a house tidy and comfortable about her, young as she is, and with no mother. The breakfast she gave me was as good as a six years' character for a young woman. It was a credit to any housewife, and she a young girl with no mother! Then look at that linen, her own spinning! I say that I'd wager the best yoke of oxen on the farm that you have made a worse choice than that girl would have been . . . , always supposing that they are decent respectable people."

"Oh! as for that, there is not a more respected and well-looked-on family in Florence."

"Then I'd stand to my bet that you've been and done worse than make up to the young woman, who put that breakfast on that cloth of her own spinning."

"Do you think so, father?"

"Not a doubt of it! I tell thee, Nanni, thou hast not head enough to go choosing a wife for thyself. I'll wager thy silly heart has been caught by some fine flaunting miss, with a white city face and a silk gown on her back, and no more sense in her head nor use in her hands than a picture out of a book. Thou had'st done better to let thy father choose for thee!"

Nanni remained silent for awhile. He was for the second time that day conceiving an idea. Perhaps he had caught the trick of doing so from his association with the Gobbo.

"Father!" he said, stopping short in his walk, and facing round in front of the farmer, "I have a very great mind . . . . I know, I feel that there is truth in every word you have been saying. I have a very

great mind to be ruled by you in this matter after all! I do think you have a deal more judgment than I . . . . I will! . . . . I will follow your advice. There is no harm done yet. I have not given any troth . . . . anywhere else. I'll be ruled by you and marry Caterina there—that's her name—if she will have me. All you say of her is as true as gospel!"

"Ah! you are beginning to see which hat the best of the family brains lie under, at last. But mark, Nanni, I said, supposing these people were creditable and respectable folk, you know. Who are they?"

"Why, you know the father, and have known him all your life, I should say, or leastways have known his name;—Maestro Simone Boccanera, my uncle's Giuseppe's partner.—No doubt about the character and respectability of the family any way!"

"Old Boccanera, my brother's partner! And that is his daughter! *Per Bacco!* why did not you tell me before whose house it was?"

"Old Simone was not at home . . . . You had never seen the daughter . . . . and I was thinking of your breakfast more than anything else."

"Old Boccanera's daughter! Yes, respectable enough!" said the *Fattore*, cogitating; "Well! ha! ha! ha! ha! I like the notion. It would be a very tidy slap in the face to my overbearing brother. We pass over the senior partner to prefer alliance with the junior. I like the notion, I say."

"Well, father; I'll be ruled by you, But don't let a good resolution get cold! Mayhap my mind might go back again. Let us strike while the iron is hot. Come! and let's talk to the girl at once. You'll do it fifty times better than I should."

"Oh, I should, should I? maybe I might. Well, we'll see. Turn about, and let's go back again."

So the father and son walked back to the house they had left; and again presented themselves at the door of the apartment on the second floor. But it struck Nanni that it was absolutely necessary to find the means of saying a word to Caterina to explain the nature of the case, and give her her cue. So merely saying to the girl who opened the door: "My father wishes to speak to the Signorina, will you show him into the sitting-room?" he slipped into the kitchen, where luckily Caterina was still occupied in putting her household matters in order, after the extraordinary feast of the morning.

"Darling," he whispered, making the most of the opportunity afforded by the necessity of doing so; "listen, quick! You have regularly won my father's heart. He has not an idea that there has been anything between us; thinks it's somebody else I am after. Says he, 'you 'll do worse I'll be bound, than marry that girl, that got my breakfast for me this morning.' So I made believe to knock under to him, and to marry you all out of obedience to him. Do you see? Come along in! He's come here to ask you. Come, quick!"

"But Nanni, who is it then that he thought you loved?"

"Oh! anybody! nobody in particular! how can you stop to talk of such nonsense now? Come in and speak to him."

"Must I come just as I am, Nanni?"

"To be sure, *anima mia*, you could not look nicer. Come at once. He will suspect something if we stay talking."

"Oh, Nanni! I am so frightened. What shall I say?"

"Answer what he says, that's all. Come!"

And so Caterina, blushing like a rose, and feeling very much inclined to cling to Nanni for support, was ushered into the presence of her future father-in-law.

"Signorina," said the *Fattore*, as she entered, "you must allow me to tell you that it was due to my son's stupidity only,—he is a good boy enough, and well-meaning, Nanni is, but not bright, poor fellow!—that I did not recognise you this morning as the daughter of my old friend Signor Boccanera. I had no idea who my hospitable hosts were."

"My father will be pleased to hear that you have honoured us so far, Signor."

"I hope to have the pleasure of thanking him in person. But this morning, Signorina, I have returned to speak on a little matter of business with you yourself. In fact I am here to do for Nanni what he would take a twelvemonth or more to do for himself. But I am one of a different sort;—a plain man who speaks his mind plain and short. Now the matter is this, I told you before who I am. You have heard of old Carlo Palli the *Fattore* in the Casentino, eh?"

"*Altro!*" said Caterina with a bright smile. "I can't recollect the time, Signor, when I did not know the name of Signor Carlo Palli, the brother of our Signor Giuseppe."

"And your father, no doubt, knows that the old Casentino *Fattore* is a tolerably warm man, and his only son,—there he is, a very good fellow in his way, though he does look rather like a gaby as he stands

there, colouring up to his eyes and biting his nails, a good fellow, a prime judge of a yoke of oxen or a flask of wine, honest, and over six feet in his stockings; the old fellow's son, I say, will be a better man still; the owner of as pretty a bit of land as any in the Casentino. Well! under the circumstances, Nanni Palli has come to the time when he should look out for a wife."

Here the old gentleman paused, and looked hard into Caterina's face, which, despite its owner's utmost endeavour, and to her very great distress, was, as she felt, becoming as hot as fire, and, as she knew, was assuming the colour of it. Finding herself compelled to speak, she said as tranquilly as she could,

"I always understood, Signor, ... that is, it was generally said, that Signor Nanni was to be married to his cousin, the Signora Laura."

"A great many things are generally said," continued the *Fattore*, "which are all lies and nonsense. It may be that such a marriage was talked of; and it may be that some folks would have been glad enough to jump at it. But the fact is, that Nanni would not have his cousin Laura."

But honest Nanni's loyal heart could not be bribed by any mean little vanity to stand this. So he said, at all hazards:—

"Nay, put it fair, father! if I would not have Laura, which is true, it's quite as true that she would not have me. We were quite of one mind about it, Laura and I."

"You are a fool, Nanni, my son, if ever there was one," said the farmer, looking not a little provoked at his son's being guilty of the folly, as it seemed to him, of crying stinking fish. But Caterina

gave him a smile, in which, beneath a slight effervescence of "malice" at top, there was a vast deal of solid warm love and admiration beneath it.

"Any way," continued the *Fattore*, "there is to be no marriage nor thought of a marriage between Nanni and my brother's daughter. That's certain. And so, as I said before, my son is on the look out for a wife."

And again the farmer paused and looked hard into Caterina's face. I suppose that such was the method of "popping the question" in the Casentino half a century before the period at which those events occurred. It seemed as if the farmer expected a bidding for the situation thus announced to be vacant. Poor Caterina was much puzzled what to say, and it was only after a long pause that, finding it absolutely necessary to say something, she ventured to remark that, "she did not doubt that Signor Nanni would have little difficulty in suiting himself."

"There, my dear young lady," replied the farmer, "you are quite out;—never made a greater mistake in your life! He is not capable—Nanni is not—of doing anything of the sort for himself. I believe he has cast his eye on some worthless silly baggage or other, with very likely not even a pretty face to recommend her; for Nanni don't know a real pretty girl when he sees one. His old father *does!*" and the *Fattore* stared with all his eyes into Caterina's face to make his intended compliment unmistakeable and acceptable.

"So I," continued the *Fattore*, with a bow to the young lady, "being a pretty good judge in those matters,—or leastways was once considered to be

such,—I says to Nanni, 'Nanni, my son, you are but a gaby, specially at such jobs. You would do better to take a wife of your old father's choosing.' And, says Nanni, 'you are right, father, sure enough. I am no judge myself. Do you choose a wife for me.' So says I . . . ."

"No, that wasn't it," interjected Nanni, who felt that this portion of his father's statement absolutely required correction. "Father said to me, 'Why not marry the girl that got my breakfast for me this morning?' And *then* I said, 'Well, father, I am willing to be ruled by you in the matter.' That's how it was."

"And does not that come to the same as I said?" retorted his father. "What do you put *your* oar in for? Any way, Signorina, he has let the cat out of the bag. My notion was as he says. Before I knew who you were I had seen enough to know what Nanni would never have found out without my help, that you were the girl to make a good wife. And when I knew you were the daughter of my old friend *Maestro* Simone Boccanera, I was more pleased with the notion than ever. So now you know pretty well what my present business is. I am here, Signorina, to ask your hand in marriage, on behalf of my son Nanni Palli."

And the *Fattore* paused for a reply.

"And he thought," said Nanni, when he afterwards related all that passed on this occasion to his cousin Laura, "he thought he was going to get a straightforward answer to his question. Lord bless you! for all his talking, I knew better! I should never have screwed it out of her if I had gone to work in that way!"

Caterina, in her embarrassment and distress, cast a look imploring assistance from Nanni, and made a little quarter of a turn towards him, as if to imply that she awaited what he had to say himself on the subject. But Nanni, feeling it to be unfair that he should be called upon to attempt the "screwing out" process a second time for mere form's sake, and that under circumstances when he could not conveniently have recourse to his own method, punished her by saying stolidly,

"I stick to my word, Signorina. I am ready to be ruled by my father in this matter."

But Caterina would not stand this, and was determined to give him a Rowland for his Oliver; so she darted a look of laughing reproach at him out of the corner of her eye, and then hanging her pretty head very demurely, and addressing herself to the *Fattore*, she said:—

"Surely, Signore, it would ill become me to imagine that I could succeed where the Signora Laura has failed! I have not vanity enough to think myself equal to her in any respect."

"I don't know that," returned the farmer; "but, any way, what does it signify talking in that way, if he can like you, and can't like her?"

"I have heard Signor Nanni say he did not love his cousin; but . . . . he did not say . . . . the rest of what you said, Signore."

"What! I didn't . . . ." ejaculated Nanni; and then suddenly recollecting that he was abandoning the part he had to play, he looked exceedingly sheepish and confused, and giving Caterina a furtively imploring look, relapsed into silence.

"No! you didn't," rejoined his father; "of course

you didn't! and why the devil don't you? Why don't you speak to the young lady? Are you such a gaby that you must stand by and see your father speak for you?"

Poor Nanni was thinking whether such a fate had ever happened to a man before as to be thus condemned to go twice through the operation he had with so much difficulty, but so triumphantly, achieved once already. Was it fair that he should be expected to squeeze it out of her a second time? Caterina, for her part, seemed quite determined to have a *da capo* of the squeezing-out process, for she remained silent, very demurely awaiting what either father or son should say next. But Nanni's sense of justice rebelled within him against this tyranny; and he said stoutly:

"When a man is asking a girl to be his wife out of his own head, it's in place for him to tell her how much he loves her; and I should think, as far as I can tell, that there would be nothing pleasanter than to tell her so twice over, ay, or fifty times over. But when he is marrying to obey his father, it seems to me all he has to say is that he is willing, and that he will be a good husband to the woman his father chooses."

In declining, however, thus distinctly to make love at command, Nanni accompanied his allusion to the pleasure of repeating the task fifty times over under other circumstances by a very eloquent look, which, though furtively delivered, reached its address in all its force, and very strongly inclined Caterina to be merciful in the use of the "situation."

"Was there ever such a block seen?" said his father. "But don't you fancy that it takes a clever

fellow to make a good husband? Nanni is not bright, poor fellow; but you trust me, Signorina, he has been a very good son, and he will make a very good husband. He will, though I am his own father. And as to what you say about you and Laura, why, bless you, there's a many things you can do that Laura can't."

"There are so many that she can do, and that I can't, Signore . . . . and . . . . I can only think of two that I can do which she cannot."

"Ay, and what are they?" said the farmer. "You tell me those, and I'll be bound I'll find ever so many more. What are the two?"

"Well," said Caterina, "I may fairly say that Laura cannot spin a thread of twenty *braccia* without an inequality in it."

"That I'll be bound she can't. That's number one. Now for the other?"

"Oh, I won't tell you the other; it's a great secret."

"Oh, come, you must tell. What can it be? I dare say there are fifty things; but I am curious to know the one you admit yourself. Come out with it!"

"Oh, indeed, indeed I must not tell that. I could not do it!"

"*Per Bacco!* But I must know. What can it be? Did Laura ever try to do it?"

"I think she did."

"And she could not manage it?"

"No, she gave it up."

"Did you find it very difficult?"

"Oh dear no! I did not try at all. It came quite naturally to me."

"Could you always do it?"

"No; I only learned quite lately. I've only just had the finishing lesson, that makes me perfect."

"Ah! I guess! It's frying rashers. And you may say, my dear, that your lesson of this morning *has* made you perfect."

"But it isn't frying rashers," said Caterina, with a laughing look at Nanni.

"Oh, *per Bacco!* what the devil can it be? Come, now, Signorina Caterina," said the *Fattore*, "we'll settle it in this way: If you will be my daughter-in-law, the sign shall be your telling me this wonderful secret like a dutiful daughter. If you don't mean to have anything to say to us, then you shall keep your secret. Now then, what is the second thing you can do that Laura can't?"

Thus pressed, Caterina stole a pink little hand out sideways towards Nanni, and hanging her head, faltered out,

"It's not so good as frying rashers. It's only loving Nanni."

* * * *

"And, *perdinci Bacco!*" said Nanni, when he was telling all this to Laura afterwards, "it was she who squeezed it out of me that time. And Babbo said, says he, 'Why, Nanni, I'm blessed if you are not like one of our Casentino watercourses,—as dry as sticks for months, and then all of a moment down comes the water with a rush, and we are all in a flood,' Babbo said; but he never guessed that we had played the same game before."

CHAPTER XI.

A FIASCO.

WHILE Nanni's anxieties were being thus brought to a happy termination, those of his friend Sebastian were approaching the culminating point. The representation of his opera, on which so much depended, was fixed for the evening of Sunday, the 5th of January. Everything which lay in his power, as the composer repeated to himself for the hundredth time, as he lay down to rest late in the small hours on the Saturday night, after once again going over the whole score, had been conscientiously done. With infinite difficulty, patience, and long-suffering the discontents, the exigencies, the rivalries, the whims of the singers, the conductor, the manager, the orchestra, the prompter, the call-boy, the lamplighter, the advisers, the friends, the critics, the green-room haunters, had been as best might be, composed. There was to be a last rehearsal on the morrow morning; and then .... the great question not only of the composer's success or failure as a musician, but of his whole life and every interest in it was to be decided. Little of healthy rest was to be expected by a man under such circumstances. But Sebastian slept, as condemned men will on their last night. He

slept from utter exhaustion of mind and body; but it was a feverish sleep, from which he started ever and anon out of dreams of being the centre of a hissing and hooting universe.

The last rehearsal passed off very tolerably well. At all events the *impresario* was contented; and prophesied a complete success. Signor Gualandi had no fears for the result, he said. The music was *good*, and good music always made its way. He knew the "*monde*" of his theatre. Nothing would do *there* but genuine classical music. His esteemed young friend's opera *was* genuine classical music; and he for his part expected great things from the opera. Of one thing, at all events, Il Signor Conte de' Lunardi must have been able to assure himself, that no pains or expense had been spared in putting the piece upon the stage.

The old fellow with the scythe and hourglass justified himself to Sebastian for his practice of never altering his pace to please anybody, during the hours of that Sunday afternoon. For the poor nervous composer would have been hard to please, had the running of the sands been modified to suit his own caprices. The passing of each successive hour appeared to him intolerably, inconceivably slow. Yet the evening approached with frightful rapidity. The minutes so slow in going, seemed to have flown with extra speed as soon as they were gone.

At home he had but scant sympathy to support and comfort him. The old Canon indeed wished him success with all his heart and soul, and was fully persuaded that he would succeed. But the old gentleman's taste in music was old fashioned;—had been formed on quite other models from those then

in vogue; and he was wholly ignorant of the theatre, and its ways and its exigencies;—and almost indeed of theatrical music. All his ideas on the subject were drawn from very different sources. And then the greenest fourscore-and-six scarcely retains a sufficiently strong hold of the world and its hopes, fears and interests to afford a very efficient sympathy to those who are in the midst of the hurry and the heat of them.

As to Marietta, in this matter again her heart was drawn in two opposite directions; and had to endure an additional load of suffering accordingly. It was dreadful to think of the agony of disappointment and despair which would overwhelm Sebastian in case of failure. Yet how wish for his success, when it would be the means of encouraging him to persist in his hateful and unworthy hope of marrying a low-born usurer's daughter! As to the result which was likely to follow from Sebastian's failure, as regarded the scheme for taking Priest's Orders,—a result which would have been more fatal to Marietta's hopes than even the marriage with Laura,—of this imminent danger of course Marietta knew nothing.

Sebastian went to the theatre early in the evening; and was in the midst of the bustle incident to such last minutes when he was told a gentleman was at the door asking to see him.

"As if I had not enough on my back at such a moment as this without being tormented by strangers! What the devil can anybody want with me!" he muttered, as he went, in no very good humour, to a wretched little room with bare white-washed walls scribbled all over in pencil and charcoal with names, dates, doggrel verses and caricature

heads, and two rush-bottomed chairs for furniture, which served at Signor Gualandi's theatre for a reception-room for those who came to speak to any of the playhouse world. There the irritable composer found Nanni waiting to speak to him.

"I know you must be busy over head and ears, 'gnor Sebastiano, ..."

"Yes! In truth I am afraid I must ask you to defer to another moment. . . . ."

"No! *amico mio!* what I have got for you, you want now. I have been to your house to find you, but missed you, and so came here. I have been with Laura. 'Tell him, from me,' she said, 'that I make no doubt that he will have the success he merits. He will understand why I cannot be there to witness it. But tell him, above all, that want of success is no proof of want of merit; and that if fortune were to declare against him in a thousand such trials, it could have no effect on the ties which bind him and me to each other, save to draw them closer than ever. Tell him I am his, and his only, in good hap and ill hap; and if it were possible to be more fondly so in the one than in the other, then I should be more fondly his in the latter.' I thought it would do you good to hear that, 'gnor Bastiano. I could face most things with such a message as that from Caterina, I know, for my own part. And so I would not fail to bring it you."

"And God bless you for it, my dear friend! It is good indeed to possess such a love! But to avail oneself of it unworthily . . . . !. Thanks, my good Signor Nanni! Thanks! and now I must run; the minutes are slipping away."

When Sebastian entered the orchestra from the

little door under the stage, a few moments before the rising of the curtain, he was received by a not very general or loud round of applause. But it was sufficient to make it necessary for him to turn towards the house and bow to the audience before seating himself at the desk of the conductor, with his back to them. In the moment thus occupied his eye took note of more than it seemed to him possible that it should have observed in so brief a space. He saw Nanni, and *Maestro* Simone, and the Gobbo, and Caterina, in a box on the "*Ordine nobile*,"* as it is called; and recognised various other friends in different parts of the house. But especially his eye rested on two faces in far distant parts of the theatre, neither of which seemed, to his nervous and overstrained mind, to be of good augury to him. Close to him, in the stalls behind the orchestra,—so close that it seemed to him difficult to avoid making his salutation to the house personal to the old gentleman himself,—sat Signor Giuseppe Palli, bolt upright in his seat, with one knee crossed over the other, and with his double gold eye-glass in his hand, with which he was emphasising the discourse he was holding with some one, not known to Sebastian, in the seat next to him. Almost at the same moment, as it seemed to him, he saw in the most distant part of the house, in a box in one of those upper tiers, rarely used much in Italian theatres, except on occasions of great attraction, and answering in position to the galleries of our theatres, he saw and instantly recognised the face of the Canon Guidi. There he was, wrapped in one of those dark

* The "ordine nobile" in Italian theatres is the tier of boxes second from the floor of the house.

blue cloaks, that may belong either to a priest or a layman, and which serve almost as a disguise to those of the former class who do not wish to appear prominently as ecclesiastics. Not that the theatre is altogether forbidden ground to the priesthood even now, although they rarely appear there. But at the time of which I am writing it was much more common to see ecclesiastics in the theatres of Italy. It seemed, however, on the present occasion, that the Canon of San Lorenzo did not wish to attract attention; and his cloak, as well as the position he had selected in the theatre, seemed to have been adopted with that view. Sebastian, however, was sure that he was not mistaken. There sate the priest alone in his box and wrapped in his cloak.

The subject of the opera was one of those stories taken from ancient history which were so commonly selected for such purposes about the period in question. It was something or other from the Persian history—there is good reason for remembering so much, as we shall see—but beyond that fact the subject of the piece has been forgotten.

There was a delay in drawing up the curtain; and ha! what is this? the corner of the fateful canvas is lifted, and the *impresario* himself steps forth upon the stage. Regrets exceedingly to have to state, ... message that instant received at the theatre . . . . the lady who was to take the second female part (a special favourite with the audience, from whose singing Sebastian and his friends had hoped much), has been taken suddenly ill! . . . . wholly impossible for her to appear; . . . . part shall be taken by Signora —— (an aged *utilité*) at a moment's notice; . . . . indulgence of public, etc., etc., etc.

And the *impresario* bowed himself out backwards behind the scenes.

The "gentle public" *is* a very gentle public in Tuscany, and rarely manifests its displeasure at a disappointment of this sort as energetically as a British audience is often apt to do. Nevertheless, it was very evident that the people were discontented. And somewhat more latitude in the manifestation of its sentiments is usually assumed by the public in the smaller theatres of Florence than is ever permitted in the calm and aristocratic precincts of the Pergola, which is to Florence what the Queen's theatre is to London. There were unmistakeable signs of ill-humour among the audience, and more than one voice was heard demanding that the opera should be withdrawn.

It is easy to imagine what poor Sebastian's feelings were under this cruel blow. It seemed as if Fate itself fought against him! He nerved himself, however, to the task before him to the utmost of his power, by vigorously refusing to allow his mind to travel onwards before the immediate present. He would give his whole thought to the score before him, and shut his eyes to the coming catastrophe, be it of what nature it might.

In a few minutes more the curtain was drawn up, and the business of the evening began. Unhappily, towards the middle of the first act the missing singer was wanted on the stage, and the miserably inefficient substitute who had been provided to fill her place came on,—of course, giving the music in a manner which, as the wretched composer said to himself, was enough to secure the condemnation of any work ever written. Nevertheless, the opera

went on without any very decided signs of disapprobation from the audience. The music was really fresh, and by no means without merit. And once or twice, before that fatal substitute had come upon the scene, an *aria* by the tenor, and a duet between him and the *prima donna*, had been rewarded with some little faint applause, which had sufficed to keep hope alive in Sebastian's sinking heart. But the house, if not bitterly hostile, was inattentive and indifferent. There was a vast deal of noise and chattering. The people clearly were not interested in what was being performed before them, and were ready to find the amusement which the stage did not afford them in any other way they could.

And thus the work which was to make its author's fortune, and pluck him back from the abyss of despair that yawned before him, dragged on—undamned—to the end of the first act. He escaped from the orchestra for a few minutes to swallow a glass of water; for the theatre seemed to him like a fiery furnace, and he was parched with thirst. He was there in a little room off the passage, under the stage, flushed and haggard-looking, wiping the perspiration from his brow, when honest Nanni ran round from the front of the theatre, and made his way to him to say, if he could, a word of comfort to him.

"It is going admirably, dear Sebastian," he said, dropping the formality of the "Signor," in his anxiety to express his friendly feeling; "What an infamous shame about La Freccia! (the missing actress.) But they all feel it so; and it will help you rather than otherwise, I am sure; Is there much for her in the second act?"

"No! Luckily nothing at all. She does not come on in the second act."

"Bravo! You'll see, we shall do very well yet! Courage, my dear friend, courage!"

"God bless you for your kindness, at all events, Signor Nanni. At least it is a comfort to feel that there is some one among all that sea of heads and faces that wishes one well. Now I must go back. Thanks, thanks!"

And the composer hurried back to the stake of his martyrdom, and the curtain rose for the second act.

This opened by an announcement made by the "*primo basso*" coming hurriedly on the stage with the news;

"*E' spento Arbace!*"* He had scarcely sung the words in the surprised sort of tone in which such things are uttered on opera stages, when, from the most distant part of the theatre a powerful and much deeper bass intoned the words, "*Requiescat in Pace!*"† with an absurdly prominent emphasis on the two syllables which made the unlucky rhyme.

It was more than was needed to send the listless audience into a general roar of laughter. The people laughed till the tears ran down their cheeks, ... and it was all over with Sebastian's Opera! The remainder was hurried over amid laughter and jeers at every moment; and such agony on the part of the unfortunate composer as may be conceived but cannot be described; . . . . . and the "*fiasco*" was as com-

* "Arbaces is dead."

† "Let him rest in peace;" or, "there let him lie!" as it might be Englished.

plete and decided as even the Canon of San Lorenzo himself could have desired it. *

When at last the curtain fell among derisive laughter as cruel as ever were the cries for blood and slaughter rising from the spectators of a Spanish bull-fight, Sebastian's first sensation was that of intense relief. To be able to rush away into darkness and solitude and silence seemed to him at that moment all that he wished or needed. While the curtain was yet dropping he left his seat, and making his way along the squalid passage, lighted only by one glimmering oil lamp, which led from the entrance of the orchestra to the back door of the theatre, he rushed out into the night, and sped away from the scene of his agony, with no other object in his brain than to avoid the light and the presence of any human being.

A minute after he had thus left the theatre Nanni was round at the back door to meet him; but he was too late. Not a soul, however, was yet leaving the theatre by the actors' door when Nanni reached it, and concluding, of course, that Sebastian had not yet come out, he determined to wait for him there. Presently the various people engaged in the business of the theatre began to pass out by twos and threes. And Nanni patiently waited, keeping a vigilant watch as they streamed past him.

"But he won't be chattering with any one!" thought he to himself. "He will come out alone, I'll bet, poor fellow!"

But at length the last laggards were leaving the

* This incident is a fact. An opera of very considerable merit completely failed several years ago at Venice, entirely in consequence of the circumstance related in the text.

place, and no Sebastian came. And it was not till the man whose duty it was came to lock the door, and assured Nanni, in reply to his questions, that no soul remained within the theatre, that he reluctantly came to the conclusion that Sebastian must have escaped before he had got round from the front to the back door. He was not a little annoyed at this; for he knew partially what the hapless composer must be suffering, and knew also that it was not good for a man at such a moment to be alone. Laura, moreover, had charged him, in case the result of the evening was unfavourable, not to lose sight of Sebastian, but to bring him back with them to the house of the Boccaneras.

Nanni returned to the party who were waiting for him at the front of the theatre, and telling them of his ill success, proceeded to accompany his friends home. But when they reached the door, he said:

"I am uneasy about him, Sandro; and Laura will blame me if I don't find him to-night somehow. He must be dreadfully cut up, poor fellow; and that is the time when one wants a friend. Look here! May be he is gone straight home—most likely. Do you run to Palazzo Lunardi, and see if he is there. I will go to my uncle's. It is possible he may have gone to Laura, knowing that my uncle would go to the *café* before returning home."

So leaving Caterina to go upstairs with her father, the two young men went off in different directions. But both errands were fruitless. When the Gobbo returned from the Palazzo Lunardi, he found that Nanni had already come back from Casa Palli, and to his no small surprise, that he had brought his cousin Laura with him.

"I am afraid papa will be angry if I am not home before he returns," she said to Caterina; "but there could be no harm in my coming out with Nanni, and papa has never made any objection to my coming to spend an evening at your house. In any case I can't help it; for I must see Sebastian to-night."

"But what can you say to him, poor fellow!" said Caterina, sadly. "What remedy is there?"

"If there is no remedy, I can grieve with him. But there is much I want to say to him. You do not know him! You don't know how much he needs a sympathising word and a supporting hand. At all events, I feel that my proper place in his present misfortune is to be near him. I could not let this night go by without making an attempt to see him."

And then came the Gobbo with the intelligence that Sebastian had not been home. The little party looked at each other; and the Gobbo was the first to speak.

"Can he have gone with the Canonico di San Lorenzo?" said he; "I know his Reverence was in the theatre. I saw him in an upper box."

"Oh, no!" said Laura; "what could have induced him to seek the society of such a man at such a moment?"

"I don't know," said the Gobbo, thoughtfully; "but I will go and see if Signor Sebastiano be at San Lorenzo."

And so saying, he took his hat and cloak again, and went out on his quest.

His way from the Santa Croce quarter of the city to that of San Lorenzo took him through the Piazza

del Duomo,—the great Cathedral Square, the bleakest and dreariest spot in the city on a winter's night, where the north wind is always, in accordance with the old Florentine legend, restlessly roaming round the walls of the mighty fabric.* There, as the Gobbo came to the corner of the Via del Proconsolo, which leads into the Piazza, he saw in the comparatively deserted part of the open space at the east end of the church a solitary figure, leaning against the rail which encircles the building in the dark shadow of one of the jutting chapels which form the buttresses of the vast dome.

A few steps further enabled him to be sure that it was Sebastian. The spot was just that where he had walked with the Canon of San Lorenzo, when he had declared that he would prefer seeking refuge under the cassock to dragging Laura with him into the abyss of his own misfortunes.

The Gobbo hastened to him.

"Signor Conte," he said, "I have been seeking for you. Forgive me for intruding on your privacy, and for venturing to say that this is not a moment to absent yourself from your friends. They are very anxious to have you among them."

"A disgraced man has no friends!" groaned Sebastian, in the bitterness of his heart.

"A disgraced man has none, perhaps," returned

* Once on a time, many years ago, says the legend, the devil and the Wind were taking a walk together. They came to the Piazza del Duomo; whereupon the devil said to the Wind, "I have a little business with the canons inside. Just wait for me here, till I come out." So the devil went into the church, and the Wind waited outside—and has been waiting there ever since; for the devil's business with the canons is not concluded yet—nor is likely to be for a long time to come.

the Gobbo, in his sententious way; "but an entirely undisgraced man in unmerited misfortune may have friends, the extent of whose affection he would never have known, but for his misfortune. There are such friends now eager to bear their share of the sorrow that has fallen on you."

"Excuse me! I cannot share it."

"And yet the Signora Laura charged me not to return without bringing you with me!"

"Laura! she was not at the theatre. It was one pang of agony spared me! Where is Laura now that you have spoken with her."

"She is at my father's house. She came thither with Signor Nanni, because at all hazards she could not rest this night without seeing you, Signor Conte."

A low moan, like that forced from a man by excess of physical suffering, escaped from the despairing musician. God help me, and strengthen me to do that which is right!" he cried, pressing both his hands to his throbbing temples.

"You will come to her, Signor Conte, will you not?" said the Gobbo, pleadingly.

"I will come with you, my kind friend."

And so they walked together to the house of the Boccaneras without any further word having been spoken between them.

Strength can stand alone; weakness needs support; —an undeniable truism! Yet it was the weakness and not the strength of Sebastian's character, that made him shrink from the presence of those of whose sympathy and affection he was well assured. It was the quivering sore of wounded self-love, which could not bear the touch of the gentlest and most loving moral surgery. It was moral weakness which

prompted him to drag himself away from all companionship with the arrow sticking in his side, and lay him down to die, if die he might, in solitude and despair. A more self-supporting strength would have enabled his heart to open itself to sympathy. Probed too to the bottom, it would have been found to be self-love, rather than a true spirit of self-sacrifice, which urged him to renounce his love, rather than link the object of it with his failures and misfortunes. A stronger and less morbidly subjective nature, a larger power of sympathy, a just appreciation of the generosity and exigences of another's love, as well as of those of his own, would have bidden him to accord and not to refuse to a woman's love the exquisite delight of self-forgetfulness and devotion. People are apt to err in their speculations on this matter, importing into a higher sphere the simpler and more self-evident morality adapted for the guidance of a lower order of moral natures. Certainly those more coarsely constructed idiosyncrasies which act only by the more simple and primal moral motors, may find their highest nobility in refusing the self-sacrifice of another. But then those are cases in which all the parties can explain their meaning in plain words, and it is clearly recognised and understood what *is* sacrifice, and what *is* fortune, and what misfortune. All these matters are not so plain when spoken of with reference to those more complex moral machines constructed throughout on the principle of duplex action. And we come upon cases in which the truest self-devotion consists in the acceptance of devotion.

The trio, consisting of Laura, Caterina, and Nanni, who had been anxiously awaiting the result of the

Gobbo's expedition, heard steps along the street, in the stillness of the night, and heard them stop at the door.

"Here they are!" cried Laura; "Sandro has found him. Caterina, dear, I must see him alone! I must speak to him as one can only speak *à quattr' occhi.** How can you manage it for me, dearest."

"We will go into the kitchen, Laura, dear! Signor Nanni will not mind. Tell my brother, when he comes up, to join us there."

Nanni did not "mind" at all. So he and Caterina slipped off into the kitchen as the Gobbo came up stairs with Sebastian. They entered the room where Laura was, together. But when the Gobbo saw that she was alone, he had too much delicacy of tact to need any telling to leave Sebastian with her.

Saying merely, "Here is the Signor Conte, Signora; I met him in the Piazza del Duomo," he shut the door on them, and went to the others in the kitchen.

"My Sebastian!" said Laura, rising, and putting out her hand to him, "Is this well? Is it well done to run from your friends—from those who love you, at such a moment as this? I *could* not rest without seeing you this night; and came here with Nanni that I might do so."

"Laura! Laura!" exclaimed he, throwing himself into a chair, and burying his face in his hands upon the table; "It is all over! I sought to be alone because my lot is too miserable to involve . . . . any one else in it."

"Sebastian! What words and what thoughts are

* "With four eyes," *i.e.*, *tête-à-tête.*

those? Are not your sorrows my sorrows, and your joys my joys? Are not mine all yours? Is it not worse than idle to talk of separating them?"

"Laura! dear, dearest, ever dearest Laura, I dare not take advantage of your love to lure you on to misfortune, and sorrow and ruin."

"Sebastian, would any misfortune that could happen to me cause you to desert me?"

"I trust in God that it would not," he replied, in a subdued manner.

"I *know* that it would not. But why, then, would you have me behave differently to you?"

"I would not have you behave differently, dearest and best Laura. But it is another thing for me to permit you to sacrifice yourself."

"But would *I* not accept your devotion, think you, into whatsoever sorrow, trouble, poverty, I had fallen? Would I forbid you to be true to your faith and your troth? Nay! that would I not. I should be proud of the pleasure which it would cause you to be true to it through good hap and ill hap!"

"But, Laura! the duties of a man are different in such cases. It is my duty to protect you from the evil your own generosity would entail on you."

"Oh, Sebastian! does not your own heart teach you better than to talk to me of a protection that would break mine. Is this the courage, the constancy, you promised me?"

"Laura! I am broken-hearted. I have no courage! Fate fights too hard against me."

"Why, what, after all, is the mishap that has befallen. Shamefully, infamously, your opera has been sacrificed to the ill-luck of a singer's illness, and a silly jest. The work remains unjudged. Will not

all Florence know that it is so? Surely, surely, there is no cause here for abandoning hope?"

"It is not my first failure, as you know too well, Laura. Last time there was no sick singer, and no foolish rhyme. But the fate of my work was the same. I have no hope!"

"For my sake, *Bastianino mio*, do not say so. Have hope, for my sake!" pleaded Laura; "for, trust me, if you despair, it is despair for me also. And now, my own love, my only love, I must hasten home. I came here because I was greedy to have my share in your trouble, Sebastian;—it is my right;—and because I hoped that it might have been a solace and a support to you to be told, even though you know it well already, that I am yours, Sebastian, your own—gladly, rejoicingly, triumphantly yours, if you will accept my love; yours still, but with a broken heart if you reject it. God keep you, my beloved, and open your heart to my words!"

"God bless you, dearest! Let the morrow bring what it may, it cannot be that such words as you have spoken should fail to pour balm into my heart. For, Laura, I do love you well, and would fain assure myself that I love you better than myself. But I have no power of thinking to-night. My head swims round; and the voices in the theatre are still ringing through my ears! But I will strive to think. God bless you, dearest!"

And so Laura left him and returned to her home with Nanni; while the Gobbo volunteered to walk home with Sebastian. The poor musician would have fain been alone. But he could not reject the well-meant kindness of poor Sandro.

They walked almost to the door of Palazzo Lunardi

without a word having been exchanged between them, when the Gobbo said suddenly,

"Shall you see his Reverence the Canonico Guidi to-morrow, Signor Conte?"

"Most likely I shall!" said Sebastian, greatly surprised at the question.

"Not certainly!" persisted the Gobbo.

"I purpose seeing him. But why do you ask, Signor Sandro?"

"Why, the fact is . . . . . there is a reason . . . . Signor Conte; would you grant me a favour, and be contented to know why I ask it by-and-bye; a great favour!"

"There are not so many men to whom I could grant anything that I should refuse, Signor Sandro. Besides, I owe you something for what you have done this night."

"Well, then, Signor Conte, you must promise me to put off seeing the Signor Canonico for a day or two."

"A strange request enough! What in the world . . . . . "

"Trust me, Signor Conte, I do not speak without a reason, as you will know before long. But I put it as a favour to me."

"Well! so be it! In truth, I feel little inclination to see anybody. I promise you, Signor Sandro!"

"Basta! A thousand thanks, Signor Conte! I have my reasons! Good night."

And the Gobbo returned briskly home; while Sebastian, thinking over all the high hopes that were in his heart when last he came down those stairs, climbed, with heavy steps and in a sort of numbed and half stupefied state of mind, to his garret.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MORROW OF THE FIASCO.

DESPITE the fundamental difference in their minds and natures, the diversity of their tastes and pursuits, and the discrepancy of their views, there had always been a strong mutual affection between Marietta and her cousin Sebastian. To her he was in the first place, and before all else, the presumptive head of the Lunardi family, and the heir to at least its ancient glories, its memories and traditions. He was invaluable to her as the pivot and centre point of all her aims and hopes and schemes. He had been a docile and affectionate child in the years gone past, and more recently a loving helpmate in the task of cherishing and taking care of their venerable uncle, and smoothing the declining path of his prolonged old age. To Sebastian Marietta had stood in the place of a mother; and the reverential affection natural to such a relationship, and which the character of Marietta was so well calculated to foster, coloured with a tinge of deference the more equal companionship of their later years.

But notwithstanding these sentiments, and partly perhaps because of them, Sebastian shrank sensitively from meeting his cousin on the morning after the

break down of his opera. Nor did she, when she had heard the result, look forward to the meeting without trouble. Both knew how partial and imperfect was the sympathy which Marietta could have for the unsuccessful composer in his sorrow. It suited Marietta's views that her cousin should suffer this failure and discouragement. It powerfully helped to ward off the marriage which was the subject of her most pressing fear and trouble concerning him, and contributed much to disgust him with a career which she would fain have seen him abandon. Yet she grieved for the agony she well knew he must be suffering; and grieved the more in that she could not with frank sincerity condole with him. And all these contradictory feelings were perfectly well comprehended by Sebastian.

He had forced himself to be at his accustomed post for the performance of his daily morning duty of accompanying his aged uncle to his morning mass, steeling himself to the necessity of telling the old man of his misfortune. But Marietta had remained in her room, and he had left the house without seeing her.

The old Canon heard Sebastian's faltering account of the previous evening's *fiasco* with less appearance of caring much about it than seemed possible or natural to the young man. He knew his uncle loved him, and would have done anything in his power to make him happy. But he did not know the effect of six-and-eighty years in diminishing the importance of such hopes and fears and pains to the mental eye of one, over whom so many successive generations of them have passed, and are now but as the fallen leaves of past autumns.—"Better to

deserve success than enjoy it;" "try, again! and better fortune next time!" "perseverance sure to triumph," &c., &c.—Such stock phrases and encouragements, chirped forth in a cheery voice, were all that the old Canon had to offer. And probably Sebastian suffered less from the conversation conducted in such a tone than he would have done from a more sympathetic appreciation of his sorrow.

When he returned to his home, passing hurriedly through the streets with a nervous dread of meeting some one to whom he would have been obliged to speak, and feeling, as he shut the door behind him, like a hunted animal that has reached its covert, he heard from the servant-boy that the Canon Guidi was with the Contessa Marietta in the sitting-room; and hastened to shut himself up in the solitude of his own little closet, there to shed hot tears over the blotted and corrected and recorrected sheets of the music which strewed the little piano.

Guidi of course had to speak to Marietta of the event of the previous evening;—enlarged on his own pain as he had watched the progress of the inevitable *fiasco;* condoled with her on the sorrow it must be to her to witness that of her cousin; but pointed out that in this case too, as usual, our troubles rightly understood are sent as blessings; and feeling sure that Marietta must agree with him, that Sebastian's best friends must view his failure in that light.

But the Canon of San Lorenzo's real business at Palazzo Lunardi that morning was to seek news of the old Canon's health. He began to feel surprise and some little uneasiness at the absence of all change in the old man. To his frequent inquiries

Marietta's answer was always the same;—her uncle was as usual, and seemed to be in the enjoyment of perfect health. These frequent inquiries made with a particularity beyond that of the ordinary courtesies of intercourse, did not surprise Marietta; they only saddened her. She thought she fully understood the feeling which prompted them. The time at which, according to her expectation, the palace would be in the market for sale was drawing fearfully near; and she supposed that Guidi was still trusting to the wintry weather and the course of nature to bring about within the necessary time an event which in any case could not be far distant.

On his side Guidi was surprised that no symptom of failing should have yet shown itself in the old man. Six doses of the deadly drug obtained by him had now been administered out of nine; and no effect was perceptible. Still he admitted no doubt of the ultimate result. He supposed that the effect must be cumulative; and that the object of the division of the doses, and of the long time prescribed to elapse between the giving of them, must be intended to defeat any attempt to trace the crime by *post mortem* examination. It had occurred to him once lately to advert to the possibility of some miscarriage in the administration of the poison. Was it possible that some suspicion had been aroused in the mind of Marietta? or that any mischance should have led to a discovery of the poisoned wine? But a moment's consideration of Marietta's character, and of her manner to him in their frequent interviews, caused him to discard such a notion as wholly impossible.

The struggle in the heart of Marietta had mean-

while been striving to shape out for itself the possibility of a different exit from the position of affairs, and another possibility of achieving the success of her hopes. The time for the final success or failure of them was at hand. Her uncle was, thank God!—yes, she *would* say, thank God!—as little likely to die within the next few weeks as he had been at any time in the last twenty years. And oh! what a relief, what an escape from a weight that was crushing the life out of her, would it be if it were possible to contemplate the realisation of her hope and her uncle's life and health as not incompatible!

For this to become possible only two things were necessary;—that she should make up her mind to confess to the old man the deception that had been practised upon him for the last twenty years, and the existence of the hoarded sum, which had resulted from that deception; and secondly, that she should induce Sebastian to fall in with her views, to give up all thought of Laura, and to join her in inducing their uncle to consent to the use of the money for the purpose for which it had been hoarded. That there would be no difficulty in obtaining this consent, if only Sebastian would join in desiring it, she felt quite sure. She had succeeded in making up her mind to the painful task of informing her uncle of the real state of the case, if only the other point could be compassed. That was absolutely necessary. Was it possible? If Sebastian persisted in declaring that his happiness could only be secured by such a marriage; and if the Canon were to be made aware that he possessed in the savings of his life the means of facilitating that marriage, the money would assuredly go for that purpose. And this was a contingency Marietta

was not prepared to endure. If only Sebastian could be brought to act reasonably in the matter, and accept the position, which the painful struggles of her twenty years of self-denial, toil, and concealment had earned for him! These meditations had been growing and taking more definite form in Marietta's mind for some time past; and now, if ever, the time appeared to have come for ascertaining what hope there might be of getting Sebastian to act in conformity with her views. The failure of his opera must have made his marriage with Laura more hopeless than ever; must have led him to despair of his own efforts to raise him from the hopeless position of dependence in which he was now living. If ever, this was the moment to find him inclined to admit new ideas and new hopes for the future into his heart.

As soon, therefore, as Guidi had left her, after having inquired for Sebastian, and been told by Marietta that he had shut himself up in his room to avoid seeing any one, she paused for a minute to collect her thoughts, and then stepping lightly across the entrance-hall, knocked at Sebastian's door,

"Who is there?" asked a dull and desponding voice from within.

"It is I, dearest Sebastian! Do not persist in avoiding to speak to me. I would fain comfort you!"

"That I am sure you would, Marietta, were comfort to be had!" he replied, as he opened the door to her; "But I see not in what quarter to look for it."

"May I come in?" said Marietta, pausing at the door. "I do not wish to pain you by forcing conversation on you while your heart is too sore to endure it; but if you can bear with me, I would fain talk this sorrow over with you."

"Dear Marietta! I know well the generous tenderness of your affection; I know that your heart bleeds for my failure, though your views and opinions would hardly permit you to wish for my success!"

"I do, indeed, feel for you, my dear boy. Believe me, your sorrow, from whatever cause, is my sorrow. I know," she added, while her voice sank almost to a whisper, and she dropped her eyes from looking him in the face. "I know, too, that this misfortune must have destroyed the last lingering hope of compassing the marriage on which your heart is set. You know my feeling with regard to it;—yet it is not impossible for me to sorrow with your sorrow over a vanished hope."

"You also, then, see it in that light, my cousin? You feel that a disgraced and unsuccessful man, with no prospect save that of beggary before him, cannot honourably hold a woman in Laura's position to engagements made under different circumstances?"

But though the temptation was strong, Marietta was too honest to make the most of what appeared to be his mood of mind upon the subject.

"Nay, Sebastian!" she replied, "I must not let you talk in that strain. Nothing has happened to you which brings disgrace with it. Nor can I pretend to think that in a marriage between the Conte de' Lunardi and Laura Palli, the inequality would not be all in favour of the lady. But I spoke, Sebastian, with reference to her father. You must have lost the hope of reaching such a position as might induce him to consent to the match."

"Do you deem it needful, Marietta, to remind me of that fact?"

"Oh, Sebastian, do not speak to me in that tone,

and with that reproachful look! Do you not know that your happiness is dearer to me than my own, and that I would do anything to compass it, provided only that that happiness be compatible with considerations that ought to be paramount to all others in your mind as in mine?"

"But alas! my Marietta," said Sebastian, more gently, "it is precisely on that point that we see things differently. That which seems paramount to you, I cannot feel to be so."

"I know it, Sebastian; and it has been the unhappiness of my life—one of the great unhappinesses of my life—that it should be so. You do not know—you cannot and never will know, nor do I wish that you ever should know—what it has cost me to see that you had staked your happiness on making an alliance which would have been fatal to all my hopes for you, and for our family—fatal to the performance of the sacred duty you owe to yourself, to all of us, and to the long and noble line of which you are the last scion."

"But, Marietta, it is like talking to me in a language I do not understand. Do me the justice to believe that if I could have recognised what you hold to be sacred duties as such, I should not have been deaf to your preaching of them."

"I know all that, Sebastian; and I should not have chosen this moment for merely going over once again the ground that we have so often and so fruitlessly travelled over together. But since circumstances, quite as much independent of my will and out of my power as of your own, have made the marriage on which your heart was set impossible, may it not be that we may at last come to wish the same thing,

and enjoy at least the priceless blessing of acting in concert and aiming at the same end? And now, my Sebastian, you see why I spoke to you of the impossibility which must have forced itself even on your mind that a marriage between you and Laura can ever be."

"I understand now, Marietta; you came to secure the windfall of good-hap blown to you by the storm which has laid me low."

"Sebastian!" she said, laying her hand on his shoulder, as she stood over him in the stooping attitude which was now become habitual to her, while he sat before the little table strewed with blotted sheets of music, his forehead leaning in disconsolate guise on his hand, and a tear gathered in her eye as she spoke—"Sebastian, your sorrow makes you unjust to me. God, who sees my heart, knows that my feeling respecting this marriage has not prevented my heart from aching for your pain. My own troubles—and I have enough of them—have not so engrossed me as to make me forgetful of yours. My heart has bled for you, Sebastian; and was with you in all the agony you have suffered during the past night. Indeed, indeed, you did me wrong in speaking as you did just now."

The tear that had been trembling on Marietta's eyelash fell, as she ceased speaking, on Sebastian's hand. He looked up to her face with surprise, for tears were an unusual phenomenon with Marietta. With her sorrow was dry-eyed, and all the more searing to the heart and brain. But Sebastian's unkind injustice had touched some gentler source of emotion than was ever stirred by Marietta's ordinary sorrows.

Sebastian looked up quickly, and was touched.

"Forgive me! Marietta," he said, taking her hand, "forgive me. Sorrow makes us cruel."

"In that case, indeed, no tigress should be crueller than I," said Marietta, with a deep sigh. "But, indeed, Sebastian, I would not be so to you. Oh! if I could but have the happiness of wishing all that you wish, of opening my heart to you, of labouring together with you for the same objects!"

"Would that it could be so, Marietta!"

"And why should it not be so, since circumstances beyond the control of either of us have, by making the marriage you wished impossible, removed the only obstacle to our agreement?"

"It is necessary for the prevention of further sorrow to both of us, Marietta," replied Sebastian, after a pause, "that we should clearly understand each other. It could only lead to future disappointment and fresh trouble if I suffered you to remain in any delusion. You speak of ends and views, and working towards an aim. I fear me, cousin, that that aim involves not only the breaking off of all notion of a marriage with Laura, but also the formation of some other tie. Is it not so, Marietta?"

"Unquestionably so! and why not? All my hopes and plans are centred in you, Sebastian; the only remaining scion of our house, as you must well know. But you do not know all the circumstances of your position. You do not know . . . . all that I could tell you . . . . if once we were so united in aim that I could open all my heart to you."

"As I said, Marietta, it is useless to allow you to build plans based on a false hope. What you are contemplating can never be. My union with Laura is impossible, you say. Grant that it be so! But do

not base schemes on the supposition that I shall ever unite myself to any other. For they will fail you."

"This is the language of disappointed love, my Sebastian, Time will close the wounds that are now fresh in your heart. And you will not then be deaf to the claims of honour and duty."

"Marietta!" said Sebastian, rising from his chair, and speaking with solemnity as he looked intently into her eyes, "I should be deaf to the dictates of honour indeed were I ever to act as you would propose to me. Words have passed between me and Laura which bind us together as indissolubly as any marriage vow could do. Laura will never wed another, be assured. Nor shall I! The honour of our name is dear to you, Marietta. Would you have me sully it?"

Marietta put both her hands to her temples, and turned to leave the room. "There is no hope!" she said. "Forgive me, Sebastian, for having pained you!"

"There is no hope!" she repeated, when she had reached her own chamber. "Father!" she cried, as her eyes rested on a portrait that hung by her bedside; "Father! I have not been wanting; but Fate is stronger than I."

Sebastian, left to himself, returned to his previous position, with his head resting on his hand, and his elbow on the table, and continued to chew the cud of his bitter fancies. Had it not been for the promise he had given to the Gobbo, he could have gone to seek an interview with the Canon of San Lorenzo, who would assuredly expect him. Yet he was glad to defer that interview. When he had left the theatre in the first violence of his despair, on the

previous night, he would have been ready to close at once with the priest's proposal. But his conversation with Laura had occurred since that time; and though it could not be said to have resuscitated the germs of hope in his heart, it had led him to feel that it would be unpardonable in him to take a step which would kill the hope that Laura was able still to keep alive in her own breast.

Then his mind recurred to the strangeness of the request the Gobbo had made. What could be his motive? Was it possible to suppose that he was aware of the proposals that the priest had made to him? And if he were, what could be the meaning of his wish to postpone the acceptance of them? Could he suppose Laura to be aware of the step he contemplated? and was the Gobbo acting at her request? And if so, why should Laura seek to put off his interview with the Canon for a few days? What difference could a few days make?

While these thoughts were passing through his mind, and he was vainly endeavouring to find some solution for the doubts suggested by them, he heard the voices of Nanni and the Gobbo asking to see him at the door. His first impulse was to refuse to receive them. But he remembered that on a former occasion they had come to him together as messengers from Laura. It might be that they were now there on a similar errand. At all events it would be necessary, if not that day, at least the next or the succeeding day, to overcome his repugnance to see and talk with them. So he opened the door of his room, and asked them to come in.

"Signor Conte," said the Gobbo, in his formal way, "if merit commanded success, we should be here to

congratulate you. It does not in this world, and we come to condole with you instead."

"I wish I had the head of the stupid brute who sung out in that way within length of my arm!" said Nanni. "It was shameful!"

"Thanks, friends, for your kind sympathies! I had given up all hope, Signor Nanni, before that unlucky rhyme upset the house. They would not have been so easily set against the work, if it had been worth anything."

"Nay, Signor Conte! excuse me! there you are wrong!" said the Gobbo. "Similar accidents have happened with similar results to works which were good, and which were afterwards recognised to be so. Whose opera was it at Milan?—I forget the composer's name; but I remember the story; and I know that the opera was afterwards successful. Well, the tenor has to come on in the second act as his own ghost. *'Son spirito incorporeo!'** he sings. Unfortunately, the tenor happened to be an immensely fat man. The audience could not resist the joke; and the opera was ruined—for the nonce. These are accidents to which the theatre is liable, Signor Conte."

"I do not pretend to any monopoly of ill-fortune, dear Signor Sandro; and I am sensible of your kindness in taking such a view of my failure. But . . . . . you know enough, Signor, to be aware that if my theatrical *fiasco* was all I had to trouble me, I could meet fortune with more courage."

"But Sandro, here," put in Nanni, "will persist in maintaining that you and Laura may likely enough

* "A disembodied spirit am I." The anecdote is fact.

bring your matters to port * sooner than either of you think for. What the devil should Sandro know about the matter, you will say. And so I say to myself. But somehow or other, I begin to think he knows something about everything. A very long-headed chap is my brother-in-law that is to be, Signor Bastiano; wonderful! Anyway here he is to speak for himself, if you can make anything out of him. And to tell you the truth, that is what I have brought him here for this morning."

"My friend Nanni," said the Gobbo, with much enjoyment in his manner, "has altogether too high an opinion of any talents I may possess. But the fact is, Signor Conte, that chance *has* brought to my knowledge certain facts,—certain remarkable facts, I may say, which .... hm .... *do* lead me to .... hm .... form an opinion that .... hm .... circumstances are occurring which .... hm .... may lead to results .... hm .... in some respects differing .... hm .... from the anticipations which some persons may have been led to form of them."

Nanni looked at Sebastian with a stare of inquiry, as much as to ask him if *he* could make anything out of these enigmatical utterances of his wise brother-in-law, at the same time slightly nodding his head, and moving his elbow in the direction of the Gobbo, as claiming Sebastian's admiration for the wonderful display of brain-work they were witnessing.

"Do *you* know anything of the circumstances to

* "*A buon porto*," a common Tuscan phrase for succeeding in anything.

which Signor Sandro alludes?" asked Sebastian of Nanni.

"*I!*" said Nanni. "I have not the least idea of the meaning of a word he says! but then I am not a great hand at understanding."

"I can't say that, on the present occasion at all events, I am any better," remarked Sebastian, somewhat drily.

"*Signori miei!*" cried the Gobbo; "it is true that I have not spoken with such perfect lucidity and clearness as I could wish to do. But I pray you both to bear with me yet a little while. I am not at liberty to speak more clearly at present;—not at present. I *do* think it probable that the position of the Signor Conte may shortly be found to be a different one from what he imagines it. It was for that reason I took the great liberty of making the request I did last night. I cannot say more at the present moment; and I must entreat the Signor Conte not to speak to any person of my having said thus much."

"Oh! I feel no temptation to speak to any one on the subject, I assure you, Signor Sandro. May I at least ask how soon you contemplate being able to bring these riddles to a solution?"

"Very shortly! in a few days, I trust. Meantime, Signor Conte, I have to ask your patience, your good construction, and that you will take no resolution regarding . . . . regarding your future,—till then. Have I your promise, Signor Conte, and your kind thoughts?"

"The latter unquestionably, my dear Sandro!" replied Sebastian, somewhat comforted in mind, in spite of the dictates of his judgment, by the Gobbo's

mysterious hints; "and therefore," he added; "the other promise may go with them."

"Thanks! Signor Conte; thanks! I trust ere long to show you that I am not altogether talking nonsense. And now *leveremo l' incommodo;*" added the Gobbo, as he and Nanni rose to take leave of the musician.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GOBBO'S COUNSEL.

FOR some days past Sandro Boccanera's mind had been at work, endeavouring to piece together the sundry bits of information which chance had thrown in his way respecting the affairs of his friends the Lunardi. The Canon Guidi was bent on preventing the match between Sebastian and Laura, being incited thereto by her father.—That was fact Number 1. This same Canon Guidi was engaged in an attempt to poison the aged head of the Lunardi family.—That was fact Number 2. The Contessa Marietta was in possession of a very large sum of money; and yet Sebastian considered himself, and was considered by the jeweller, to be penniless and wholly unprovided for.—That was fact Number 3.

The Canon Guidi apparently thought the same of Sebastian's position. Did he really think so? Did he share Marietta's secret? That she did not share his terrible one, Sandro felt perfectly sure. And what bearing had these facts upon each other? He felt, on consideration, strongly persuaded that Guidi was aware of the existence of the property possessed by Marietta; and that the design of putting an end to the old Canon's life had some reference to this money.

Guidi therefore was plotting treason of some sort against Marietta. There was every reason to suppose that he was in her confidence, and yet, as Sandro felt perfectly sure, she was not in his confidence.

The result of his meditations was a determination to communicate to her the facts of the poisoned wine. It was running a risk to do so; but he thought that Marietta knew him well enough to believe his testimony, supported as it would be by the production of the drugged flasks.

The next point to be decided was, how he was to find an opportunity of speaking to her on the subject. It was absolutely necessary to secure a private and uninterrupted interview with her; and that was rather difficult. He remembered the painful embarrassment he was placed in, the last time, when the Canon Guidi and Marietta so evidently wished to get rid of him; and he was not disposed, if it could in any way be avoided, to risk a repetition of the same annoyance.

After some reflection, he determined to endeavour to meet her in the church of San Giacomo. He was well aware that she was in the habit of frequenting it in the night; and nothing was easier than for him to remain in the building when it was closed at "the twenty-four." * The only difficulty was that, as he had no means of knowing when Marietta was likely to pay one of her accustomed visits to the chapel of her ancestors, he might chance to watch several nights in vain. Nevertheless, he determined on this plan; and made up his mind to begin it that

* Sundown. The old Italian way of reckoning the hours; still used in the case of the hour of the "24," but obsolete in every other.

same night;—the one subsequent to the *fiasco* of Sebastian's opera at the theatre, that is to say, and succeeding to the day of his and Nanni's visit to the Composer.

When the church was closed at an hour after sundown, the Gobbo remained in a corner concealed behind one of the monuments in the Lunardi chapel. There was not the least danger that he should be observed, even if the darkness had not helped to conceal him; for the careless Sacristan never dreamed of so much as even looking round the unfrequented little church. He went to the lamp hanging before the principal altar, and laying his keys upon the marble altar-rail the while, trimmed the wick, and poured a little oil from a cruse into the lamp. The Gobbo had forgotten that the same process would have to be performed for the lamp that hung before the altar of the Virgin in the Lunardi chapel; and when the man came to do it, he thought that he must have been seen. He stood close in his corner, however; and the Sacristan having done his job, without raising his eyes from the lamp, quitted the chapel, left the church by the western door, and turned the key in the lock.

The Gobbo, as soon as the man was gone, stepped into one of the confession boxes, as being the most comfortable seats afforded by the scanty furniture of the humble little church, and intended to employ the time which must elapse before Marietta could come, if she should come at all that night to the church, in meditating on all the possibilities of the circumstances, the riddle of which he was bent on solving, and in conning over what he meant to say to her. One point also on which he had not made up

his mind, was, how he should first accost Marietta, if she should come into the church, so as not to startle and alarm her too violently. And while he was meditating on this, he fell fast asleep in the confessional.

Now, it so happened that Fortune was favourable to the Gobbo's wish of obtaining a private interview with the Contessa Marietta. It was her wont, as has been said, often to seek comfort and strength under her trials and disappointments from prayer in the chapel of her family; and she preferred the night-hours for the purpose, both because it was then that her cares and desponding thoughts, undisturbed by the duties of the day, pressed most heavily on her, and because she could then most easily absent herself for any length of time unobserved, and also be sure of finding the little church wholly unoccupied.

Why could she not have found the same comfort from prayer in the solitude of her own chamber?

Those who would ask such a question are not acquainted with the practices and consequent habits of thought and feeling taught and engendered by Roman Catholic devotion. The whole system of pious practices, which constitutes the practical part of the Romanist religion, is based on the inculcation of the belief in the special holiness of certain localities, and the peculiar efficacy of prayer there offered up. Of course the natural and necessary tendency of all such ideas is to localize and therefore to materialize the object of worship: and whatever theories respecting the saintly office of intercession, and the difference between worship and adoration, may be invented and put forward by professional theologians to justify and excuse their teaching in

these matters, no one who has ever lived among a believing Roman Catholic population can doubt for a moment that the persons represented by the material figures there visibly present in the places where prayer is said to be especially efficacious—even if not, as is often assuredly the case among the most ignorant and gross-minded, the very wood, stone, or picture itself—are to the popular mind the real, sole, and ultimate objects of supplication;—and of supplications more fervid and intensely sincere, than the same minds would be capable of addressing to an incorporeal and unfigured Deity.

To Marietta no spot on earth's surface was so sacred as the little chapel of the Lunardi family in the church which had been raised by the piety of a member of it. It was her Mecca, her Holy of Holies. The dust beneath its sculptured and inscribed flagstones was to her heart and imagination more awfully holy ground than any other ever trodden by the foot of man. The marble statues of the worthies of her race were not entitled by any decree of her church to receive her worship. But it will not appear surprising to those who know how easily the ill-trained mind sinks into idolatrous materialism, and with how great difficulty it soars to the purity of communion with an absolutely spiritual Being,—it will not to such, I say, seem surprising if, by a very easy and slight movement on a very slippery descent, Marietta unavowedly, and half unconsciously, did in fact address her supplications inclusively, though not perhaps exclusively, to those venerable effigies of the persons who, according to the fantastic imaginings of her monomania, had themselves so great an interest in them.

Of course Marietta was most disposed to seek the consolation of these nightly communings with the idols of her imagination when most the chances seemed to be going against her in the great struggle to which she had devoted her life. And the disappointment she had undergone in her interview with Sebastian that morning had been a bitter one; so bitter as to leave, as far as Marietta could see before her, little other resource or comfort save such as might be found in the superstitious devotion which dictated her night visits to the church of San Giacomo de' Lunardi.

That night accordingly, when the Canon and Sebastian had gone to bed, and the little servant had gone to his home for the night, Marietta took her hand-lamp and the key which opened the door from the terrace into the private gallery in the family chapel, and descended the back-stair. She passed into the gallery, and from thence, by the little stair contrived in the corner of the chapel, descended, lamp in hand, into the body of the church.

She was on the last step of this little winding stair, and was in the act of stepping out from it on to the pavement of the chapel, when she was suddenly startled by a sound that seemed almost close to her. Now, though Marietta's mind was quite open to the ready reception of any superstitious imaginings, yet she was too familiar with the place in which she was, it was too dear to her, and her thoughts were too much accustomed to dwell among its appearances, and the ideas they were calculated to suggest with a feeling of fellowship and benevolent communion, for her to be assailed by superstitious dread. She would have been in no degree incredulous as to any

audible or visible manifestation which it might have pleased the spirits of the dead who lay around her, to vouchsafe to her. But such would not have been to her an object of terror. Towards those past generations of her ancestors, who had according to her creed so great claims upon her, her conscience was at all events void of offence. She had been a liege and faithful daughter of her house; and felt herself on that soil to be among approving and sympathising friends and kinsmen.

She was not terrified therefore, but greatly startled by the sound that had reached her, and she paused with her foot on the step, holding the lamp above her head to see if its light could enable her to distinguish any one in the chapel. While she thus paused the sound was heard again; and this time it seemed exceedingly like a snore.

But who could be in the church at such an hour? and whence did the noise proceed? She stepped out into the chapel, and listened for a repetition of the sound. There it was again; surely somebody snoring; and now, as it seemed, not in the chapel, but in the body of the church. Gently stepping out from beneath the arch that separated the Lunardi chapel from the rest of the building, and still holding the lamp above her head, she was able at the next repetition of the sound to trace it clearly to one of the confessionals that stood against the opposite wall of the nave, at right angles to the high altar.

Guided by the noise, she crossed the little nave, and bringing her lamp to bear full on the centre compartment of the confessional, recognised, to her immense astonishment, the Gobbo fast asleep in the priest's seat. She stood a minute spell-bound by

surprise, and considered whether she should awake him or not, when the effect of the light on his upturned face decided the doubt for her. Sandro opened his eyes suddenly with a start, and in an instant remembered perfectly well all the circumstance of the place and the occasion, save that his first impulse was, not to account for his being where he was, but to apologise for having been asleep.

Most people have a strong dislike to being caught asleep when sleep has been involuntary.

"Signora Contessa!" stammered the little man, "truly I am shocked that I should have allowed sleep to overcome me thus. I assuredly had no intention of sleeping." And as he spoke he rose and came out of the confessional, bowing profoundly to the astonished Marietta.

"Signor Sandro Boccanera!" she exclaimed, "You here at this hour!"

"In fact, Signora Contessa, I was weary. It is difficult for a weary man to keep awake in solitude and stillness."

"But how came you to be here, either awake or asleep, Signor Sandro? That is what I cannot understand."

"Signora, I will tell you frankly. I came here, and remained purposely when the church was shut up for the night, in the hope of meeting you here. I knew you were in the habit of coming hither frequently in the night-time, and I determined on taking that means of seeking an interview with you."

"But, Signor Boccanera, it would surely have been easier, as well as fitter, to have come to me in my home. You know that I am always glad to see you."

"Your ladyship has always been most kind, most

condescending to me. But there were difficulties in the way. I wished to have the opportunity of speaking to your ladyship without the chance of being interrupted. And that was not easy to find. I trust that your ladyship will admit, when you shall have heard what I wish to say, that the importance of the matter is such as to justify the means I have taken."

"But how did you know that you would meet me here this night?"

"I did not know it, Signora. I determined on watching here every night till I should be so lucky as to see you. Fortune has favoured me. This is the first night of my watch."

"At all events, you were of opinion yourself, Signor Sandro, that the conversation you wished to have with me was of sufficient moment to justify a great deal of trouble in obtaining it."

"In truth, Signora, it did so appear to me; and I think that, when you have heard me, you will not think differently."

"Signor Sandro, it is now many years that we have known each other, and I have always felt a respect for you and your worthy father, not only on account of your kindness to us in days past, which has never been and will never be forgotten by me or mine, I trust, but also on account of the old and gentle blood which flows in your veins. I have always flattered myself, too, that you entertained a respect for my family, and feelings of kindly sympathy for us in our misfortunes. For these reasons I will not refuse to give you the attention you ask, although you must be aware that the very strange way you have taken to ask it would

assuredly prevent me from granting as much to any other."

Thus saying Marietta placed the lamp she held on the marble top of the railing that encircled the high altar, and seating herself on one of the benches that stood against the wall on either side of the confessional, awaited what the Gobbo might have to say to her.

"Signora," he began, "I am fully sensible of your condescending kindness and of the confidence you are placing in me. If in the course of our conversation I shall be obliged to appeal to them yet further, allow me to assure you that in the end you will give your approbation to the course I have taken."

"I am quite disposed, my friend, to think that I may do so. In the meantime I am ready to give you all my attention."

Now, it had been a matter of long and anxious deliberation with the Gobbo in what manner he should commence and conduct the conversation he had sought. He had come there with the intention of revealing to Marietta the atrocity of the Canon Guidi; and he still held to his purpose of doing so. But he had made up his mind not to do it directly and without preparation. He wanted to feel his way. In the first place, he was there to obtain as well as to give information. There were sundry points on which he was anxious to obtain enlightenment; in great measure induced, it must be admitted, by his natural love of intrigue and mystery and the mania for knowing all about everybody's affairs and secrets; but in great part also by the hope of being seriously useful to people for whom he had a veritable respect and regard. In the next place, it

was a serious thing to make the charge he was about to prefer against a man in the position of the Canon, and that to a person who was and had been for more than twenty years an intimate friend of the accused. It behoved him to be very careful, or he might easily do more mischief than good. Besides all this, the Gobbo had a very large gift of the cautious diplomatic spirit which prompts a negotiator to keep the cards in his own hand hidden while he strives to obtain a peep at those in the hand of the other player. Acting therefore on these various considerations and impulses, the Gobbo began the conference :

"Signora, circumstances have led to my seeing the Signor Conte Sebastiano more frequently of late than I previously had the good fortune to do ; and, I may add, have led also to my enjoying a certain measure of his confidence. And I have been much grieved to observe that the Signor Conte is far from happy."

"Surely, Signore, you did not think it necessary to seek this interview with me to give me that information ?"

"Not so, Signora ! I mentioned that I should have to appeal to your favourable construction to acquit me of impertinence. And what I would speak of is the cause of the Signor Conte's sorrow ?"

"Alas ! the cause is but too notorious. You must be aware, Signor Sandro, how much my poor cousin had set his heart on the success of his opera."

"But the failure of it is not the only nor the main cause of his present despondency. It is of that other cause I would speak, Signora."

"I will not affect to be ignorant of your meaning. But I am at loss to imagine what advantage can

arise from speaking of the unfortunate passion which has so misled my cousin as to make him desirous of forming a connection so wholly unworthy of his position."

"Should you deem it right, Signora, to oppose such a marriage under all circumstances?"

"Assuredly I should, under every conceivable circumstance. And it surprises me much, Signor Sandro, that you, of all men, should ask me that question. I had imagined that your opinions and mine, on such a subject, would have been in unison."

"Signora, I am proud to think that in the main they are so. The preservation and perpetuation of an ancient historical name and lineage would be as keenly felt a desire with me as with yourself. And I would prefer that this end should be accomplished by intermarriages between races equally distinguished and long descended. But, Signora, I would not lose sight of the first object because it might be found incompatible with the second. In the times in which we live there is no possibility of holding, or at least of continuing to hold, such a position as the heir of an ancient line should hold without the aid of wealth. Look at the example of the aristocracies, which promise fairest to keep as good a position in the coming as they have in the past generations. None of these have refused to recruit themselves, both as regards blood and as regards property, from the classes below them. Is it not wiser to avail ourselves of the money-getting talents and habits of these, rather than to run the risk of becoming, as so many a fine old name has become, extinct from atrophy?"

"But even if I were inclined to think that there

was reason in what you say, Signor Sandro,—and I will not assert that there is none,—it would be equally useless to discuss or even to think of this matter. Strange as it may seem to you or me, so all-absorbing has the power of wealth become, that even if we were willing, Signor Giuseppe Palli, the jeweller and money-lender on the Ponte Vecchio, would not be willing that his daughter should marry with the heir of the Counts dei Lunardi!"

"It cannot be expected that such persons should appreciate the value of noble birth and purity of race. And Signor Palli, as I have reason to know," continued the Gobbo, furtively eyeing Marietta closely as he spoke, "supposes the Signor Conte to be wholly without the means of contributing anything towards the maintenance of a wife and family."

"All Florence, alas! knows but too well, that such is the case," replied Marietta, with her eyes on the ground.

"Signora Contessa," replied the Gobbo, after a pause, and speaking in a lower tone, "I think I may venture to say that I know your ladyship's noble nature sufficiently well to feel sure that property in your hands can be destined to no other use than the upholding and restoring of the family."

Marietta started as he spoke, and shot a sharp short glance of inquiry into his eyes. Before dropping her own again, she said,

"Property in my hands! What is your meaning, Signore?"

The Gobbo kept his eyes also fixed on the ground, not venturing to look at the lady, as he replied, keeping in some sort to the letter of the truth, though scarcely to the reality of it:—

"Signora Contessa, it was without any intention of impertinently prying into your secrets that I acquired the knowledge that you are the mistress of a very considerable sum of money."

Marietta felt a sudden cold all over her, and then in the next moment a rush of blood, which flushed her face and made her glow from head to foot.

"Can it be that *he* should have betrayed me!" she said, speaking rather to herself than to her companion; and rising to her feet, from the bench on which she had been sitting.

"I know not to whom your ladyship alludes," returned the Gobbo, timidly and submissively.

"The information that has reached you, Signor Boccanera, Heaven knows by what means, must have been derived from His Reverence the Canonico Guidi."

"Signora, referring to the words which this moment escaped you, I feel myself bound to say that I have reason to think that his Reverence *has* betrayed you; though I have not any grounds for believing that he has done so respecting the matter of which we are speaking."

Marietta put both her hands to her temples, straining back from them the braids of her silver-flecked black hair, with an action habitual to her in moments of deep emotion, and turning as she stood towards the high altar, seemed for a moment to be engaged in mental prayer. Then turning quickly round to the Gobbo, and this time looking him full in the face, she said:

"And may I ask, Signore, to what use you have put or intend to put the knowledge, however it may

have been acquired, which you have obtained respecting my affairs?"

Had Marietta at that moment replied to Sandro's last words by demanding in what respect she had been betrayed by the Canon of San Lorenzo, he would have no doubt communicated to her the momentous facts which he had come there with the intention of telling. But her paramount interest in the other inquiry had caused her to let the other matter pass, to be returned to afterwards.

"You cannot, I trust, imagine for an instant, Signora Contessa, that any secret of yours, however it may have come to my knowledge, would be less safe with me than with yourself. I have put my knowledge of the fact in question to no use whatever, nor should I ever dream of putting it to any use, save that of enabling me to serve your ladyship and your family, —and that only by means of conferring with yourself."

Marietta remained silent for a few minutes, covering her eyes with her hand, and leaning her elbow on the pedestal of a statue that stood at the corner of the altar railing. Then raising her head, she said, putting out her hand to the Gobbo:

"It is all very strange! but, my good Sandro, I do and will believe what you say. I do believe that you would aid and not mar, as far as in you lies, the object I have at heart. But you spoke as if you had counsel to offer, and I see not whence any hope or help is to come."

The Gobbo felt infinitely relieved as he hurriedly took the long thin hand held out to him, and with the old-fashioned Tuscan homage of an inferior to a superior, stooped to kiss it.

"I cannot tell you, Signora, how great a comfort

and consolation your words are to me," he said, as the tears gathered in his eyes. "Had I not been so before, I should be bound to your service now for ever. And your condescension emboldens me to say what was in my mind. Taking everything into consideration, Signora Contessa, and bearing in mind the facts I had the honour of suggesting to you when we were speaking of the reasons for and against such a marriage as that of the Signor Conte with the Signorina Palli, I would humbly put it to you, whether the future fortunes of the House of Lunardi might not be more effectually cared for by making such a marriage than by rejecting it? Endowed by such a fortune as that in your ladyship's possession, old Giuseppe Palli would probably be only too glad to welcome such a proposal, especially as he will doubtless find it very difficult to compel his daughter to any other alliance."

"You know not what you are talking of!" cried Marietta, nervously taking a few hurried steps across the nave of the church, towards the Lunardi Chapel, and as suddenly returning to where the Gobbo remained standing. "You know not that that money is sacred,—that it would be sacrilege to divert it to any other purpose than that for which it has been accumulated."

And again her agitation made her cross and recross the little church with a hurried step before she continued:

"Listen! Signor Boccanera; for I think that you can understand the principles and feelings that have ruled me in this matter. When my dear and ever venerated father died, now more than twenty years ago, exiled from the home of his ancestors by mis-

fortunes long and courageously but vainly baffled with,—died broken-hearted at the ruin and fall of his house, and the thought that never was still by night or by day, that the home of his ancestors was gone from him and that his place would know him no more, he left to me the sacred legacy of his sorrows, and the yet more sacred duty of devoting my life to the struggle, even if a hopeless one, to do somewhat towards repairing the misfortunes of the family. Who was there but me? me, a young girl of barely twenty years. I accepted the task, not with any hope of doing much, but with the deep feeling that, whether it were much or little, it was to that aim and that thought that my life was due. I was not spared the trial of temptations that might have . . . . but it is needless to speak or think of that . . . . I banished all thoughts save one. By degrees a hope and a possibility opened itself before me. Providence was pleased to bless the singleness of my heart and my endeavour. That good and simple-hearted old man yonder made me the mistress,—insisted, against my wishes in the first instance, on making me the absolute mistress of his house and all he possessed. His income, properly managed, was much larger than sufficed to supply the wants of all of us, and that income was shortly afterwards largely increased. By little and little, by strict economy and rigorous self-denial, by judicious management, and by the blessing of Heaven, the sum of which you have spoken was amassed. Are you aware of the amount of it?

"I am aware," replied the Gobbo, with downcast eyes, "that it exceeds the sum of thirty-five thousand scudi."

"Your information is correct. And can you not imagine with what aim that sum has been amassed? Can you not guess what hope, like a sacred star distant but always fixedly shining on the edge of the horizon before me, supported me through those long and dreary years of monotonous daily petty saving, still beckoned me onwards with its steady and unwavering though far-off light, and exalted into a high and noble enterprise the petty daily cares which, without such an object, would have been the sordid struggle of a miser. Can you not guess it? Do you not feel what must have been the one undying desire of the disinherited daughter of such a line as mine, thrust forth from the soil in which it had taken such deep root and flourished so proudly for more than six hundred years;—the desire of the heart panted after, as the fever-stricken wretch pants for water, which grew upon me in its all-consuming intensity, as the possibility of attaining it seemed to increase? For what, think you, was the painfully accumulated hoard stored up, which year by year it has been my reward to dedicate on my knees in yonder chapel to its sacred destiny? Look at those venerable effigies of my forefathers, whose blood runs in my veins, statesmen of their country, generals, princes of the Church, the glories of our race, sleeping there under the vaults raised by their piety, and beneath the shadow of the ancestral home which bears their name, and which did for six centuries mark their place in the land, but now marks only their fall and forfeiture of it! How often on my bended knees on those stones have I offered up to the grieving spirits of those illustrious exiles the tribute destined to be the means of restoring the race and the name to its

place in Florence! And now,—now when at last the long-toiled-for prize seems almost within my grasp, when a just Providence has decreed that the low-born profligate who has intruded himself into the home of the Lunardi shall himself be thrust out, and the Heaven-willed opportunity arises of restoring the grand old name to its place and its honours,—now you would speak of diverting the means for this deliverance to other objects!"

Marietta, while she thus poured forth the deepest feelings of her heart, had been standing in front of the altar, so that the light of the hand-lamp, which she had placed on the balustrade that encircled it, fell exactly on her tall figure drawn up to its utmost height, and on her pale face eloquent with her emotion, and long tresses disordered by her previous agitation. In the midst of more pressing thoughts the artistic imagination of the Gobbo was struck by the strangely picturesque form, which standing there in the slender pencil of light amid the surrounding gloom, might have furnished an admirable study for a prophetess in the moment of inspiration. She had unconsciously raised her voice in speaking till the vaults of the little church re-echoed the vibrations of its full contralto tones; and the deep, unbroken stillness which succeeded to it when she ceased speaking, produced by the force of contrast an impression of solemnity on him, and probably on herself also. He remained silent for some minutes, while she crossed the nave of the church, and entering the Lunardi chapel, knelt down on a faldstool before the altar of San Giacomo de' Lunardi.

Sandro, after a minute or two, stepped across and stood by the pillar of the arch that divided the

chapel from the body of the church, till she arose from her knees.

"Signora," he then said, "you do me justice in supposing that I can appreciate the feeling and the motives that have actuated you . . . . . But . . . . . you spoke of an opportunity arising, which might enable you to achieve your purpose?"

"Certainly I did! This man—the pedlar's son,—Marchese as he calls himself—has, it seems, ruined himself so completely that the dear old Palazzo must once more come into the market for sale. I am given to understand that it will assuredly be sold about the end of Carnival. Then there exists but one difficulty, ..." said Marietta, with a deep sigh.

"But, Signora Contessa," interrupted the Gobbo, "I fear, I greatly fear, that you have been led into error in this matter. It is true that Perini is ruined, utterly ruined, and that Palazzo Lunardi will pass out of his hands; but, dear Signora, it will not be openly sold. It will never come into the market. I am well acquainted with the whole transaction. Signor Giuseppe Palli is Perini's chief creditor; and the Palazzo will pass into his hands. Indeed it may be said to be his already, subject to the redemption of it by Perini before the end of Carnival, which is out of the question. Palazzo Lunardi becomes the property of Giuseppe Palli; and it is but too sure that he will not let it slip through his fingers."

Marietta had sunk on a bench against the wall of the chapel as the Gobbo spoke. She seemed perfectly overpowered by this sudden extinction of every possibility of attaining the purpose of her life.

"Then all is lost,—all is over!" she groaned.

"Betrayed, deceived, fooled! But it cannot be that the Reverend Canon Guidi was aware of the arrangement of which you speak. He imagined that the Palazzo would be sold?"

"Not so, Signora! If the Canonico Guidi led you to imagine that it was possible that you should become the purchaser of Palazzo Lunardi, he has been false to you also in this. He well knows, that at the end of this Carnival it will become the property of Giuseppe Palli."

Marietta groaned aloud.

"In what a miserable delusion I have lived!" she cried, "and now all is over! all is lost! my life has been thrown away!"

"But, dearest Signora, it seems to me that, on the contrary, the very circumstances that seem to oppose themselves to your plans, furnish the means of carrying them into effect."

"What can you mean, or be dreaming of? Have you not yet understood the only aim for which I have lived?"

"Bear with me an instant patiently, Signora Contessa," said the Gobbo, in an excited manner, very different from his usual stilted pomposity, while his eyes glistened with eagerness. "For what purpose," he continued, "do you imagine Signor Palli is so anxious to possess the noble old palace? For what but the endowing and establishing his only child? If the palace belongs to Giuseppe Palli, it will belong to Giuseppe Palli's daughter, ... and to his daughter's husband. Do you not see a ray of light in the darkness? Surely the way, the only way, by which your object may be attained is to use the handsome fortune at your disposal for the

purpose of promoting the marriage of the Signor Conte with the heiress of the Palazzo Lunardi. Does not this seem so to you, Signora Contessa?"

As the Gobbo spoke, and his idea gradually developed itself, Marietta's attention became more and more intently riveted on his words. She remained, when he had finished, for a short space silent, and absorbed in intensely concentrated reflection. At length, suddenly seizing the Gobbo's arm with a hand trembling with nervous emotion, she said in a low whisper:

"Would the man sell his consent, think you, for thirty-five thousand scudi?"

"It is a handsome fortune, a good deal more, to the best of my judgment, than would suffice to purchase the palace, if it were for sale, but it is certainly small in proportion to the wealth that will be one day the heritage of the Signora Laura. Yet I feel little doubt that Signor Palli would consent to the match, since it is the best thing that he could do. The Signora Laura, you may rest assured, will consent to no other marriage."

Again Marietta remained silent for awhile, before she replied:

"Yet, my good Sandro, it would not come to the same thing. The palace would be part of the wife's dowry, would be settled on her, would appear as hers in all acts and in the archives for ever more."

"If the rest were arranged, I think there would be little difficulty in settling all that matter as you would have it. Signor Palli is a practical man who looks only to solid interest. If a marriage were determined on between the Conte Sebastiano and the Signora Laura, he would probably make no

difficulty about taking your ready money as a part of the bride's portion, and allowing the Palazzo to become the absolute property of the bridegroom."

"In that case indeed, my task would have been accomplished, my life's labour would have its full and sufficient reward, and I could say '*Dunc dimittis servam tuam, Domine,*' with a tranquil and easy heart. How can I enough thank you, my kind friend for your truly invaluable information and counsel!"

"Speak not of that, Signora Contessa! Do you not suppose that I too shall have my share in your rejoicing."

"In truth," continued Marietta, reflectingly, "the Signora Laura is not in all respects the alliance I would have chosen But . . . . *Basta!* I shall have too great reason to be thankful if I can by her means work out my object."

"And your ladyship must permit me to observe," rejoined the Gobbo, "that if unhappily the Signora Laura is deficient in noble birth, it is in truth the only deficiency which can be alleged against her, as a desirable match for the Conte Sebastiano. And the very considerable wealth—more, probably, than your ladyship thinks for—that she will be heiress to, cannot but be deemed a very favourable circumstance as regards the restoration of the fortunes of the family."

"True, my friend! It is most true; and I ought to be very thankful. If this last hope does not melt into disappointment beneath my hand, I *shall* be most thankful."

"Does your ladyship agree with me in thinking that it would be desirable to lose as little time as

may be in entering into communication with Signor Giuseppe Palli."

"Surely so, surely. But it will be necessary . . . . there are certain arrangements, ..." said Marietta, hesitatingly, as she reflected that there yet lay between her and her object the extremely painful task of making her uncle aware of the deception that had been put upon him for the last twenty years, and of his present real position. It was not that Marietta had any fear of the old man's making any difficulty whatever about using the money for the purpose of enabling Sebastian to marry his beloved; but the confession that had to be made was a very painful one.

"I trust," continued Marietta, "to be able to speak to Signor Palli the day after to-morrow. Perhaps you will kindly let me see you in the afternoon of that day."

"At what hour, Signora Contessa?"

"We will say at three, if that will suit you, Signor Sandro."

"I will not fail to wait upon your ladyship at that hour on the day after to-morrow."

"And now, my friend, before we part, there is another point on which I want you to enlighten me. You spoke of my having been misled—purposely misled—by his Reverence the Canonico Guidi. It is more that twenty years that I have considered the Canonico my assured and intimate friend. It is very painful to me to think that I should have been deceived in this. Yet from what you have said of his knowledge of the arrangement entered into with Signor Palli about the Palazzo, I know not what to think!"

And then the Gobbo pointed out to her at length how the Canon of San Lorenzo had been perfectly well aware of the destination of the palace, and further, how he had striven—a still worse treachery in the eyes of Marietta if possible—to induce Sebastian to enter into Priest's Orders. But he did not tell her of the more serious accusation of the poisoned wine. Finding that for the present, at all events, it was not necessary for any special purpose to do so, he had followed the secret instincts of his nature in retaining that secret yet awhile longer in his own keeping.

When they were at length about to part, it was between one and two o'clock in the morning; and Marietta said, after again and again fervently thanking the Gobbo for his counsel and helpful interference,

"But what will you do, Signor Sandro? How will you leave the church? I have no means of letting you out through the house, without waking the porter."

"And I should not well know where to go, if you did, Signora! I should not like to disturb the house at home at this hour. No, I will remain here; as, in any case, I should have done if I had not been so fortunate as to see you to-night. I shall do very well wrapped in my cloak in this confessional here. I have no doubt that I shall sleep very soundly. And I shall have no difficulty in leaving the church without attracting any observation when the sacristan has opened it before daybreak to-morrow morning."

So Marietta took up her lamp and stole back to her chamber by the hidden stair in the corner of the Lunardi chapel, and the door communicating with

the terrace, with a very much lighter heart than she had ever trodden the same way before. Nevertheless, she did not go to her bed to sleep; for most of the remaining hours of the night were passed by her in thinking of the confession she had to make the next morning to her uncle, and striving to consider how best she might open the matter to him. But she ended by finding herself obliged, as people mostly do in such cases, to leave the manner of the dreaded conversation to the inspiration of the moment.

As for the Gobbo, he was fast asleep within five minutes after Marietta had left the church.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CANON'S AUDIT.

IT was the aged Canon's custom, on returning from his morning mass at the Cathedral, to enjoy an hour or so with his violin before taking his mid-day repose. And this was the time at which Marietta had determined to make her confession to her uncle. It was the first moment at which she could conveniently do it, and she was too nervously anxious to have it over not to seize the earliest possible opportunity for the task.

The old man had returned from his morning duty cheery and in good humour as usual, and was already seated before his music desk, spectacles on nose, and his beloved instrument in hand, when Marietta came into the room, in a state of trouble and agitation, that must have been visible to any sharper eyes and more awakened attention than those of the old Canon.

"Good morning, my child. How art thou, my Marietta, this morning? Do just see if thou canst find me, among the music there, that last thing which came from Germany."

"Yes, dear uncle, I will, in a minute. But first I want to speak to you on another matter."

"Nothing amiss with the piece of *cignale*,* I trust. It was a lovely piece, and I have been looking forward to it, I can tell thee."

"No, uncle, it is a more serious matter than that. Uncle, I have a confession to make to you."

"Thou wilt have to carry it elsewhere, my child. I'll none of it. I've given up confessing for the last twenty years. And I'll warrant me thou hast no great matter to confess."

"Indeed, uncle," rejoined Marietta, with a deep sigh, "it is a great matter, and one which must be confessed to you."

The old man looked up over his spectacles with a momentary glance of some little surprise; but the matter was not of sufficient interest to interfere with the operation of tuning his violin. And Marietta had to continue her confession amid the twangs and squeaks, and grunts incidental to that process.

"Indeed uncle, it is a very serious matter. I have been deceiving you, uncle, for many years past."

"Deceiving me, my child?" *ping! pang! pong! pung!* "It has been a very pleasant deception then!" *pung! pung!* "and has answered marvellously well. Prithee keep it up a little while longer."

"Nay, uncle, that cannot be. I have led you into error respecting the amount of your income."

"Are we in debt, child?" said the old man suddenly interested, and for the first time taking his attention from his instrument.

"Not so, uncle; on the contrary."

"And have we not enough in hand to go on to the end of the quarter?"

* Wild boar—a favourite winter delicacy in Florence.

"More than enough, uncle. You have more than you are aware of."

"Brava, Marietta! In that case, what do you say to a bottle of *vino di Cipro*, after the *cignale*, to-day, eh, eh!" and the old gentleman winked pleasantly as he looked up, and playfully tickled her behind the ear with the end of his bow. "A sealed bottle of *Cipro*, once in a way, eh, *Marietta mia?*"

"Alas! my dear uncle, you might have had that and many other things every day, and I have not given them to you."

"Every day! Nay, that would be unreasonable. Let a feast be a feast!"—*ping! pang! ping! pang!*

"But, uncle, it is not a question of a bottle of wine one day or every day. You might have lived in far greater comfort in all ways. You have been deceived in the results of the yearly accounts for years past."

"What do you mean, child? Do let me have my bit of music in peace. I don't want any better comfort than that. What do I know about the . . . blessed * accounts!"

"But, uncle, I tell you that you have been kept in ignorance of the disposal of your income for these twenty years; and it is absolutely necessary that the true accounts should now be made known to you."

"Twenty years' accounts! Marietta, are you mad? My remaining life would not suffice for the labour! Have you kept all sorts of trouble from me for twenty years, to bring it on me in a lump, and break my back with it when I am near ninety!"

* "*Benedetto*" is a very constantly-used Tuscan euphemism when the exact reverse is meant.

"But only the results, dear uncle!"

"The results have been, that I have lived very happily for twenty years; and may perhaps live a few more, if you will only let me have the quiet enjoyment of my fiddle in peace. Now, do pitch the accounts to the . . . . hm . . . . other room, there's a dear girl! What signify the accounts if we have enough to go on?"

"Only just to show you the true position in which you stand, uncle."

"My dearest Marietta, look here! You have kept accounts,—and all for me, my poor child!—till it has become a mania with you. I, having never kept any, have an equal aversion to them. Habit is everything in this life. But we ought not to impose our habits on each other. Mine are too old to be changed. I am sure I could never make up my mind to bother my head with the accounts of the passing week; and as to having any dealings with the ghosts of dead figures of *lire* and *scudi* spent and gone twenty years ago, I absolutely refuse; I couldn't do it, my dear. It would make an end of me at once! And I do so want to try this *fantasia!*" . . . *Piree! piree! pang! pang!*

"You won't refuse, for my sake, when I ask it of you, uncle, just to look at least at the final balance!"

The old man gave a vicious glance at the neat little heap of account books, which Marietta had brought into the room with her, as he said in reply:

"Needs must, I suppose, when *somebody* drives! Well, my child, just go into my room and bring me my snuff-box. You will find it in one or other of the drawers. If one must do such work, one must at least have a pinch of snuff to keep one awake."

The old gentleman knew perfectly well that his snuff-box was in his coat pocket, and that Marietta would therefore be detained a minute or two by her vain search for it. She dutifully went on her errand, leaving the little pile of account books on the table. But no sooner had she quitted the room, than the Canon, chuckling to himself with intense enjoyment, rose with wonderful alertness from his chair, and seizing the little packet, neatly tied up as it was, opened the door of the closed earthenware stove, in which a brisk fire was burning, popped the obnoxious books in, and closed the stove. When Marietta came back saying that she could not find the box anywhere, her uncle was again seated, violin in hand, before his music-desk.

"I can't find the box, uncle! I have looked in all the drawers."

"Dear me! here it is in my pocket! how stupid I am getting!"

"Why . . . . . where are my books?" said Marietta, looking about; "I thought I left them on the table here! How very strange!"

"Did you take them into the bedroom in your hand?"

"No! I certainly left them here on the table! Where can they possibly be?"

"Things are generally very apt to get out of their proper places; perhaps sometimes they may find their way into the proper place!"

"What do you mean, my dear uncle?"

"Why, my dear, to judge by the roaring I hear inside the stove, I should not wonder if your books had got into the best place for them!"

"Oh! uncle!" cried Marietta, rushing to the

stove and opening the now heated door with the tongs. And there was the heap of account books, over which so many, many hours of rejoicing, of disappointment, of remorse, of castle-building had been passed, still retaining in part the outline of its form, but reduced to a collapsing mass of glowing tinder.

"Ah! they will never break any man's heart any more!" said her uncle, with an expression of intense satisfaction; and he executed a triumphant flourish on the fiddle, as he spoke.

"Oh! uncle!" cried Marietta again, looking perfectly aghast at the *auto da fé!*

"My dear, you must forgive me! Self-defence, you know! I could not bring myself to undergo the torment you proposed to inflict on me. So now then for the *fantasia* in peace and comfort!"

"But at least, I must tell you, uncle," said Marietta, driven to bay, "that you now are the owner of more than thirty-five thousand scudi!"

"What!" exclaimed the old man, looking at her with his bow suddenly arrested in mid-air.

"The savings from your income during the twenty years we have lived here amount to the sum I have named."

"You must be crazy, *Marietta mia.* The abominable accounts have addled your brain!"

"Not so, uncle! I am stating a certain fact. I can show you all the vouchers and securities for the money."

"No! Not that! I will believe you without that! But, Marietta, how is it possible?"

"By constant saving, by keeping you in this poor apartment when you might have lived with every comfort in a much better one, by constantly putting

out every penny saved, to interest, and by much good fortune in the means found for investing the money, it has been possible."

"Why, Marietta! you ought to be finance minister of the Empire! Who could ever have dreamed of such a thing! But, my child, finance ministers always know what to do with their revenues. What are we to do with ours? What did you say was the amount of it?"

"Between thirty-five and thirty-six thousand scudi, uncle."

"Holy Virgin! It seems incredible! What on earth do you mean to do with it? And mind, Marietta, once for all I wash my hands of it! I did not save it up; and I won't be responsible for the use of it. That is but fair."

"I had thought, uncle," said Marietta, with her eyes fixed on the ground, "that perhaps you would like that this money should be used for the purpose of rendering possible the marriage on which, as you know, our Sebastian says his happiness depends."

"And a capital thought too! Ay, indeed! If this sum of money will do the business, then indeed it will not have been saved for nothing. But to think that all this time I have not played a note! Now, do you go to Sebastian, my Marietta, and settle it all with him, and let me have half an hour in quiet, there's a darling! And I say, Marietta," he added, as she was about to leave the room, "we may have that bottle of *vino di Cipro* with the *cignale* to-day, eh! For once in a way, you know, eh?"

So Marietta with a lighter heart and a more open brow than she had worn for many a long day, went

to tap at the door of Sebastian's chamber on a very different errand from that on which she was bent, when on the previous day she had done the same thing.

It will not be necessary for us to be present at this second interview. Sebastian's extreme surprise, his delight, his gratitude to both his uncle and cousin may be very readily imagined. As soon as he had realised the astounding facts, and overwhelmed Marietta with the expressions of his joy and thankfulness, he wanted to run off instantly to his mistress. But that Marietta could not allow, till she had had her interview with Signor Palli. She wished now that she had fixed that same day for the purpose. She had pictured to herself the scene with her uncle as a different one from what it had turned out; and had imagined, that after it she should not have been in a condition to transact her business with the jeweller, even if her uncle should have authorised her to enter on such a negotiation. As it was, she would fain have gone off on her expedition to the Ponte Vecchio forthwith. She was obliged, however, to restrain both her own and Sebastian's impatience till the morrow; and instead of allowing him to carry his good tidings to Laura's feet, to dispatch him in quest of the bottle of *vino di Cipro*, which was all that the aged head of the family claimed as his own portion of the family fortune.

The meeting too, at dinner, between the Canon and Sebastian,—the justice done to the choice wine and the wild boar's chine,—the mutual gratulations, and glorifications of Marietta and her wonderful stewardship,—and the old Canon's chuckling account

of the way in which he escaped once and for ever the infliction of the accounts, must all remain unchronicled. And we must hurry on to the morning of the following day.

The Canon was gone to his mass, Sebastian had accompanied him as usual, rather marvelling that the old man did not seem more elated at the new prospects of happiness opening before him; although he had given his all to secure it as freely as if that all had been merely his blessing; just as he had marvelled at his imperfect sympathy with his previous distress;—for five-and-twenty cannot comprehend the relation in which six-and-eighty stands to the world;—and Marietta, having commended the apartment to the vigilance of the little boy in black camlet knee breeches and black worsted stockings, set off to walk to the Ponte Vecchio.

As on the previous occasion, the Signora Contessa Marietta de' Lunardi was courteously begged, on asking if she could see Signor Palli, to give herself the trouble of stepping into the little den behind the shop; and, as before, she found that most aristocratic-looking of money-lenders sitting weaving his dangerous webs, like an old father-long-legs in most unexceptionable glossy black broad cloth.

The old gentleman had little doubt but that the object of the lady's visit was to unsay a great deal of what she had said on the occasion of her previous interview with him in the same place. He thought that in all probability the step that proud lady was thus taking was the result of communication between his daughter and the family of her lover; and expected to have set before him with all the eloquence the lofty-mannered Contessa could command,

the advantages of a connection with a family so noble, and the hopelessness of inducing his daughter to form any other alliance. And to all such representations the jeweller was prepared to oppose the most courteously cutting and decided negative. It was not that he was not fully aware of the difficulty he was placed in by the second of the above arguments; and of the strength imparted by it to the case of the adversary. But he had no intention of giving up the game, at all events yet awhile. There was at least all the chapter of accidents in his favour. The young man looked delicate, and might die;—would to Heaven he might!—he might prove inconstant;—better still! in short an hundred things might happen. In the meantime he was quite sure of his daughter's promise to make no marriage without his consent. And his present best policy was clearly to make it evident that not the slightest chance existed of his ever being induced to give that consent.

The old gentleman rose to receive his guest with a most courtly bow, and waved an invitation with the double eyeglass to her to take a seat in the only chair in the little den besides his own, on the opposite side of the table. Then pushing his chair a little backwards, throwing his long person back in it, as he shut the Russian-leather-bound account-book before him, crossing one knee over the other, and holding the eyeglass ready for action in one hand, he made a little wave, accompanied by a slight inclination of his narrow, shrewd-looking, old grey head, as a sign to the lady to enter on her business.

Now, although Signor Giuseppe Palli would never have failed on any account to receive a lady, and

especially a Contessa, with a most profound and courtier-like salutation, above all in the presence of the men in his shop, or of the people passing his shop-door in the street,—and though he would have deemed it quite unworthy of himself to use any modes or phrases, in speaking to such a person, inconsistent with the most polished courtesy of outward form and manner;—yet it was in the nature of the money-lender to be in substance as insolent to a ruined aristocrat as he could be servilely smooth to one in the process of ruining himself. And being irritated by the treaty of alliance which he suspected between his daughter and these beggared Lunardi, he was prepared to show himself so in his conversation with Marietta.

"I wish to speak to you, Signor Palli," began Marietta, "on the subject which, as you no doubt remember, was discussed between us on the occasion of my last visit here."

"I am sorry, Signora Contessa, that you should have thought it worth while to do so. It appeared to me that the topic was finally disposed of."

"We parted on that occasion," continued the lady, "in perfect accordance as to our views and wishes on the subject; and I trust we may be equally fortunate now."

"If your ladyship's views remain the same, I can answer for there being not the remotest chance of any alteration taking place in mine. But in that case I confess I hardly see the necessity for any further discussion of the subject."

"The views and wishes of all of us, Signor Palli, are subject to change from change of circumstance. And though the grounds of the objection I felt, and

frankly expressed to you, with reference to such an alliance as we were speaking of, are among the few things that are immutable, yet reasons may arise strong enough to over-ride that objection."

"Really, Signora Contessa," said the jeweller, with a smile eloquent with the most sarcastic irony, and bowing profoundly as he sate, while the gold eye-glass with a magnificent sweep of the arm was pointed towards his own exquisitely plaited shirt-frill, "really your ladyship is too benignantly condescending. Unhappily the objections, which I on my part humbly, yet perhaps with frankness equal to your own, had the honour to submit to your consideration, are, though certainly not based on grounds which are immutable in their nature, yet such as no reasons will over-ride."

"Yet those objections, Signor Palli," said Marietta, quietly, and with no appearance of having noticed anything offensive in the jeweller's manner, "may be, I presume, changed by circumstances, though not over-ridden by reasons?"

"At all events, Signora, I am not aware of any change of circumstance in the least likely to bring about such a result."

"It is exactly because you are not aware of any such circumstance, Signore, that I am now here to inform you of it."

The jeweller raised his eyebrows, and almost imperceptibly shrugged his shoulders.

Marietta proceeded imperturbably:

"The motive of your objection to a marriage between your daughter and my cousin, was based on our want of wealth, was it not, Signor Palli?"

"You compel me, Signora Contessa, to go over

again ground which it was painful to me to touch on at all. It was not so much the want of what may be called wealth, as the entire absence of any property whatever,—the . . . . destitution, I am obliged to say!"—(he had the word "beggary" on his tongue, but was afraid to utter it)—"to which the Conte Sebastiano is reduced, which made me feel it my duty to reject all idea of such a suitor for my daughter. I was compelled to point out to you, Signora, that the nobility of ancestry, which appears to constitute the whole of the Signor Conte's available possessions, represented in my eyes a value somewhat less than that of the smallest coin extant; . . . . in my eyes, I say;—I may be wrong, but such is my valuation."

No speech could be much more distasteful than this to Marietta; yet she did not feel in any danger of losing her temper, but continued the thread of her discourse with the most perfect equanimity.

"I am quite aware, Signor Palli, of your ideas on that subject, and have no wish to discuss them with you. But I may conclude, from what you have said, that if the Conte Sebastiano de' Lunardi were not without . . . . I will say a fair competence, then your objection to such a marriage would not be overridden, but would cease to exist."

The jeweller shrugged his shoulders, protruded his nether lip, and raised his eyebrows, in the manner of a man who wishes to express his utter indifference to any subject proposed for his consideration."

"Might we not," said he, "employ our time to more profit, Signora, than in discussing hypothetical cases, which are scarcely likely to become actual ones . . . . Forgive me for the suggestion, but I

cannot afford to give my time to merely agreeable conversation."

"I have no intention, Signor Palli, of occupying your valuable hours, or my own, with any such idle amusement. My business here to-day is to make you aware of the circumstance that the hypothetical case, which you naturally enough deem so improbable, has in point of fact occurred. The Conte Sebastiano de' Lunardi has become the owner of a moderate competence. Under those changed circumstances he again submits to you an offer of his hand for your daughter.

"I must confess, madam, that your statement completely takes me by surprise," said Signor Palli, who at Marietta's announcement of Sebastian's changed fortunes had indicated his renewed interest in the conversation by raising himself bolt upright in the chair, and placing his double eyeglass on his nose. "May I presume to inquire the source of . . . of so gratifying an alteration in the Signor Conte's prospects?"

"I should *not* presume," Marietta could not resist the temptation of saying, "to inquire, Signor Palli, respecting the sources of the Signora Laura's fortune," and the money-lender was surprised by the very unusual and forgotten sensation of growing red in the face, as she said it; "nevertheless, I have no objection," she continued, "to tell you that the means now at my cousin's disposal are the result of my uncle the Canonico's savings from his income."

The jeweller bent his head gravely at this announcement. "It is very gratifying," he said, with a touch of sarcasm in his tone, "to know that the

Signor Conte has such a resource to stand between him and absolute want. But perhaps I may be excused, under the circumstances, for adverting to the fact that my daughter's fortune will be, I may say, a large one. And to speak frankly, it *does* seem to me that any . . . . a . . . . results from the source you speak of, cannot be such as to justify me in . . . . a . . . . regarding them as worthy of any consideration, ... in relation to the topic of our conversation . . . . in relation, I mean, to that topic:" and he looked at Marietta over his eyeglasses as he spoke.

"My uncle's life has been a very long one; and his ecclesiastical revenues have been considerable. Perhaps I may venture to add that the sums resulting from his economy have been judiciously managed."

At each clause of this sentence the jeweller gravely bent his head in sign of attention.

"But, perhaps," continued Marietta, "the better way would be to state plainly and simply the amount of the sum at my cousin's disposition."

"Assuredly, my dear madam, the better and the only way. Without that we are only talking in the dark."

"The sum which the Conte Sebastiano can command is somewhat more than thirty-five thousand scudi."

"Thirty-five thousand scudi!" exclaimed the money-lender, startled into an accent of genuine surprise, which in the next instant he was much ashamed of for having manifested. "It is indeed a large sum, a very large sum to have been amassed by such a means . . . . but a very small one, you will

forgive me for saying, as the fortune of a pretender to my daughter's hand."

"I have not asked, and do not ask any question as to the amount of the Signora Laura's fortune," returned Marietta, retaining her calm self-possession, despite a twitch at the heart at her companion's last words; "and it is for you, Signor Palli, to consider how far the same motive may weigh with you which influences the Conte Sebastiano's relatives in this matter, the difficulty, namely, of inducing either the proposed bridegroom or the proposed bride to acquiesce in any other arrangement."

"Signora, without admitting the existence of any such difficulty on the lady's side, altogether refusing, observe, to entertain the notion of any such difficulty on our side of the question, I am yet ready to allow that the existence of such a sum as you speak of . . . . in ready cash, did I understand you to say? . . . . however inadequate in proportion to the lady's fortune, may yet merit a certain degree of attention. Am I right in conceiving you to have spoken of ready cash?"

"Perfectly right, Signor Palli. The amount is in ready money absolutely available at the shortest notice."

There was a pause of a few minutes, during which Marietta was anxiously doubting whether her cause were won or lost, while the jeweller was rapidly coming to the conclusion that in truth he could do no better than accept the proposal before him, and that, considering all the circumstances of the case, it was well—very well that the matter was no worse. Was it not in point of fact just thirty-five thousand scudi saved out of the fire;—just so much gained?

For what could he have done but yield, after a more or less protracted struggle, in any case?

"But will you permit me, Signora Contessa," said the jeweller, breaking silence, "to ask an explanation of a circumstance which appears to me puzzling. Since this money was in existence, wherefore did you make no allusion to the fact on the occasion of our conversation here a few months ago?"

"You forget, Signor Palli," said Marietta, with a slight smile, "that I was at that time equally anxious with you to put an end to all idea of a marriage between my cousin and your daughter."

"True, Signora! But, nevertheless, it seems strange that you should have allowed me to remain in ignorance, when that ignorance led me to . . . . to . . . . to consider . . . ."

"To designate my cousin and myself as beggars, Signor Palli. I remember, now you remind me of it. I am afraid that you will find it difficult to understand the explanation of the puzzle; . . . . which is simply that—supposing no connection to be projected between us—it was perfectly indifferent to me whether you considered the Lunardi as beggars or not."

And it was true that Marietta felt such indifference. Her reply, however, was, as the reader is aware, not quite true. But she could not explain to Signor Palli the real causes of her secrecy; and the temptation to let the *roturier* understand that all his insolences to her were as arrows shot at the sun, was a strong one.

The jeweller bit his lips; and did not believe a word of what she said.

Marietta then went on to open the question of the

Palazzo Lunardi, saying that she had been informed that he was in fact the purchaser of it from the present proprietor; and explaining that it was the wish of her family, as a mere matter of feeling,—a whim,—that in case a marriage were arranged between Sebastian and Laura, such a portion of the sum she had named as might be deemed equivalent to the value of the palace should become a part of the dowry of the bride, while the palace should be the property of the bridegroom.

To any such arrangement, provided no difficulty should arise respecting the valuation of the palace, Signor Palli, who saw plainly enough that Marietta's proposal must be accepted, and was at the bottom of his heart right glad to get so well out of what he had, ever since his conversation with his daughter, looked on as a very bad business, professed to see no objection.

He should, he said, have the honour of laying the flattering proposal of the Signor Conte before his daughter; and if the Contessa would furnish him with the information necessary to enable him to satisfy himself respecting the property she had spoken of, he would have the honour of communicating with her on the subject at an early day.

And so that important interview ended.

CHAPTER XV.

THE "SCRITTA."

IT is in no wise necessary that Signor Palli's communication of his views to his daughter Laura, when he returned to dinner that day at his usual hour, should be narrated at length. And Marietta's report of the result of her interview with the jeweller to Sebastian may be equally left to the reader's imagination. There can be no difficulty in picturing to ourself the reception of the tidings by either the lady or the gentleman. But there was another person whom the same news reached almost as quickly, who was very differently affected by the information.

It so occurred that some of the details furnished to Signor Palli by Marietta, respecting the sum destined to become the fortune of Sebastian led him to seek certain explanations from the Canon of San Lorenzo, as having been the person engaged in the investment of the money. And it thus happened that the Reverend Guido Guidi was among the first persons who learned the news of the proposed marriage.

Three things were thus made certain to him, and two others probable.

The certainties were, first, that he had lost the game, as regarded the hope of causing the thirty-five thousand scudi to remain in Marietta's hands useless, or well nigh useless in her eyes, when all hope of recovering Palazzo Lunardi should have been lost, and the only heir to the name in Priest's Orders; secondly, that the infamous crime which he had perpetrated was useless and objectless; and, thirdly, that no purpose could be served by administering to the old Canon any more of the drug. He hoped indeed that it might turn out that the entire number of doses was needed to produce the effect, and that by discontinuing them his conscience might be spared the weight of so atrocious and gratuitous a murder.

The two probabilities which the news of the proposed marriage presented to his mind were, first, that Marietta had discovered his treason to her in the matter of persuading Sebastian to take Orders; and, secondly, that she had also discovered that he was aware of the arrangement which had been come to respecting the passing of the Palazzo into the hands of a new master.

And for all these reasons the Canon determined to pay a visit to his friends on the third floor of Palazzo Lunardi, to feel his ground, and ascertain how he stood. For, despite the failure of his plans, the Canon had no wish at all to quarrel with persons in the position that Sebastian and his wife would hold in society, as the wealthy owners and inhabitants of the Count's ancestral palace.

"I have been extremely surprised," he said, as he and Marietta were once again alone together in the little sitting-room, in which he had so often tortured

her, "to hear a piece of news, which, at all events, I should have expected to hear, if it were true, from none but yourself, Marietta. What is this about the arrangement of the marriage we were so anxious to prevent?"

"It is true, Guido. The marriage is arranged to take place. Altered circumstances have altered my wishes on the subject. I too have been more surprised than I will express to you by learning that you have been for some time past aware that it was arranged between the Marchese Perini and Signor Palli that the Palazzo should pass from one to the other by private contract, so that in no case could it have been possible for me to become the purchaser of it."

"Holy Virgin! can you be serious, Marietta, in what you are saying? *I* know anything of this arrangement! I swear to you that I hear of it now for the first time. How should I have heard of it? Am I in the confidence of Signor Palli or of the ruined gamester down stairs? In truth I have reason to complain that you could have harboured such a suspicion for an instant."

"It would be a very great relief to my mind, Guido, to think that I had been in error in doing so. My information was derived from one who I am quite sure did not intend to deceive me. But it is possible he may have been deceived himself."

"A very little reflection must, I should think, suffice to convince you that such must have been the case."

"But alas! Guido, is there not another matter in which you have—Heaven above only knows with what motive—played me false even more cruelly?"

"What in Heaven's name do you allude to? Pray do not wrap your accusations in riddles."

"None can know half so well as you, Guido, all my hopes, and all my feelings, with regard to Sebastian; and yet you would have caused him, had your efforts to persuade him to such a step been successful, to take Priest's Orders!"

"Pshaw! I really wonder that you can make such an accusation to my face! That is what a man exposes himself to by seeking by every available means to second a woman's wishes. Was it not a paramount object with you to cut short every idea, and every possiblity of this marriage? The greatest difficulty in your way lay in the constancy and resolute determination of the girl. What was the most likely, the only means of shaking that constancy? What but to give her reason to believe that she was given up by her lover; that he had failed in his constancy? And how attain that object? By requesting the young gentleman to change his mind, I suppose! By suggesting to him the propriety of forthwith falling in love with somebody else, perhaps! Much good you would have done by any such means! *My* plan was a feasible one. A man does not make up his mind to take Orders on Monday, and accomplish his intention on Tuesday. But his despairing mood properly worked might have led him to the intention of entering the Church. The announcement of that intention properly used would, if anything could, have bred resentment in the lady and induced her to give him up. The danger would thus have been tided over, and you would have been in plenty of time to guard against any possibility of the suggested notion being

really acted on. Was it likely or even possible that he would have sought to carry out such a scheme save by my assistance and intervention? I had the game safe enough in my own hands. And really I am ashamed to have to defend myself against so absurd a suspicion as that you have been induced to admit into your mind by setting forth such a number of self-evident propositions."

"As I said before, Guido, nothing would be more gratifying to me than to find that I had thought amiss in this matter. It is very bitter to be forced to see a treacherous foe in one who for twenty years has been considered an intimate and trusted friend."

"I must say, Marietta, that I think such a misconception ought to have been impossible to you."

"Perhaps it ought to have been so," said Marietta, submissively and thoughtfully. "You must pardon me, Guido, for an error which has already worked its own punishment by making me suffer acutely."

"May I ask, then, if you still deem me worthy of your confidence, how the affair stands at present?"

"When it became known to me not only that the Palazzo could never be bought by me, but that it was destined to become a part of the dowry of Laura Palli, I was led to see that the sole hope of accomplishing my object lay in making instead of marring this marriage."

"It needed indeed but little penetration to see that, as soon as the facts were known. It only remained to ascertain whether the sum at your command was sufficient to bribe old Palli to consent."

"Precisely so! And that I have done. I need not tell you that Giuseppe Palli's daughter is not in all respects the person with whom I could have

wished to see Sebastian ally himself. But, taking everything into consideration, and duly appreciating the narrow escape I have had from seeing my hope altogether shipwrecked, I may be very thankful that matters have turned out as they have."

"Indeed I think you may!" retorted the priest, somewhat sneeringly. "And may I further ask," he continued, "from whom you received the important information which enabled you to bring your boat to port thus prosperously?"

"It was Sandro Boccanera, the Gobbo, who told me the facts of the case, Guido. Doubtless he became acquainted with them through his father's connection with Signor Palli."

A very dark shade passed over the Canon's face, as he replied: "I was not aware that you were in the habit of consulting the Gobbo on your family affairs, Signora."

"Nor have I been, Guido, as you know very well. But you are also well aware that his acquaintance with all of us is of very old date, and that he has on all occasions manifested a sincere respect and regard for our family," replied Marietta, evading any more precise reference to the circumstances of her interview with Sandro.

Nor did the priest seek to push his inquiries any further upon this point. Though sufficiently ill-pleased at the miscarriage of his own schemes involved in the success of those of Marietta, and feeling no small animosity against the Gobbo for his share in bringing about this result, though he little guessed how great and important that share had been, the Canon of San Lorenzo was quite decided not to quarrel, if he could avoid it, with the

Lunardi or the Palli family. And after a little further talk in the course of which, having apparently recovered his good humour, he congratulated Marietta warmly on the bright prospect of success now open before her; and making a few inquiries as to the arrangements to be made with regard to the property on either side, and the day fixed for the signing of the contract, he took himself off.

By the time the necessary inquiries had been made, the necessary information given, and the necessary papers drawn up, it was coming towards the end of the Carnival. It was determined therefore, that in the case of both the events which were to come off,—the marriage of Nanni and Caterina, that is to say, as well as that of Sebastian and Laura,—the "*Scritta,*" or contract, should be signed at the end of Carnival, and the weddings take place shortly after Easter.

This signing of the "*scritta*" is a ceremony which forms a more prominent feature in the arrangements which accompany marrying and giving in marriage in Italy than is the case among ourselves. In the first place, though a considerable interval often intervenes between this ceremony and the real tying of the knot, it is practically held to close the door on the period during which after-thoughts and changes of purpose are still permissible. The "troth" is then held to be given and accepted on either side, and though nothing has been done legally binding until the actual celebration of the wedding, "society" would very severely reprobate any drawing-back after the signature of the "*scritta,*" except on very weighty grounds indeed.

Then, in the next place, this "*scritta,*' which often

regulates a variety of matters respecting the future life of the married couple,—such as, for example, in some cases, the number of dishes to be daily set on the family board, and occasionally still stranger matters, which we islanders would never dream of introducing into such a document, or thinking about a tsuch a time,—this important "*scritta*" is not to be signed in a dingy attorney's office, or in a five minutes' interview at home with a gentleman who brings a blue bag full of papers in a hackney-coach; but is a festal though mighty formal affair, which always takes place at the habitation of the bride. There, on an evening designated for the purpose, assemble the relatives and near friends of both the parties, all *en grande toilette;* the bride is dressed, "in a concatenation accordingly,"—(a kind of silken garment so called, my dear young lady, made of some delicate material, with lace and jewels; very becoming, as I am given to understand),—and is placed in great state on a sofa by herself as on a throne, where all the attendant multitude bow before her, a doubtless gratifying though somewhat unamusing introduction to the honours "society" reserves for the venerable corps of matrons.

Of course this "*scritta*" and its attendant ceremonial are among the privileges of "property." "*Cantabit vacuus coram latrone viator.*" Those who possess nothing do not trouble themselves with conveyancers. And accordingly our poor Caterina, being a tocherless lass, would naturally have neither art nor part in such mysteries. But Nanni insisted upon being generous. He had lands and goods if she had none. And though usage would in such a case have made anything in the way of what we

call "settlement" unnecessary, Nanni persuaded his father to allow him to endow his bride elect with such a dowry as should need the execution of a "*scritta*" after the fashion of the lords and ladies of creation. And it was settled that this formality should be accomplished at the "Casa Boccanera" on the evening previous to that fixed for Laura's "*scritta*" to be signed, so that Nanni and his betrothed might be among those present at it.

Among the various little matters of preparation for these two ceremonies, there was one insisted on by the Gobbo which puzzled his friend Nanni fully as grievously as any of the other mysterious doings in which he had unwillingly taken a part. Taking an opportunity when they were safe from interruption, Sandro took Nanni into his chamber and showed him, as it appeared to him, six quarter-flasks of the wine they had bought carefully sealed up.

"Now, 'gnor Nanni," said the Gobbo, who, notwithstanding the close relationship in which they were shortly to stand to each other, could not break his habit of giving his brother-in-law the "Signore," "we shall, please Heaven, very soon be at the end of all our mysteries, but there is yet one thing more you must do for me."

"No more sentry-work, I hope, Sandro!"

"Nothing of the sort, 'gnor Nanni. It is only this. You must convey those six quarter-flasks into the house of Signor Giuseppe, your uncle; and you must find some place where they can be at hand, under lock and key, where I can get at them when I wish. I shall want to do so on the evening of the Signora Laura's "*scritta*." Mind, they *must* be locked up and I must have the key."

"But how am I to manage all that, I should like to know? I am not over much at home in my uncle's house!"

"It can easily be done with the help of the Signora Laura. She will help us. We will tell her that it is for a whim of mine to make a surprise for the guests on the evening of the '*scritta*.' And in fact that is the exact truth."

"Well! your whim is a queer one, and not a little troublesome, friend Sandro. May not we have a taste of this wonderful wine here at *our* '*scritta*'?"

"Not a drop of it for all the world!" replied Sandro. "All the six little flasks must go to Casa Palli, as I said."

"Well! if they must, they must; we'll play out the play, as I said, this time, anyway."

And by the intervention of Laura, who fancied that it was merely some joke of Nanni and his friend, intended to make a laugh on the evening of the "*scritta*," the flasklets were duly ensconced in a little cupboard, just outside the door of the drawing-room, of which the key was consigned to the Gobbo.

The final settlement between the Marchese Perini and Signor Palli, by which the former was expropriated, and Palazzo Lunardi became absolutely the property of the jeweller, took place at the beginning of the last week of Carnival. And the fateful evening, which was to be made memorable by the betrothal of Laura and Sebastian, and by the full accomplishment of Marietta's "dream of life" for twenty years, in accordance with the agreement between her and Signor Palli, by virtue of which the Palazzo Lunardi became the property of the Illustrissimo Signore Conte Sebastiano de' Lunardi in

consideration of the sum of twenty-eight thousand scudi paid to the said Signore Giuseppe Palli,—the fateful evening appointed for all the signing and sealing, that was to make these arrangements "*faits accomplis*," was fixed for the last day of Carnival,—the Tuesday that is before Ash Wednesday.

Nanni and Caterina had been duly betrothed on the previous evening; and the famous service of table linen, yet finer than that which farmer Palli had seen on the morning of his auspicious breakfast in Casa Boccanera, which little Caterina had boasted of, and which was the pride of her heart, was duly and honourably mentioned in the contract. It has no doubt been mentioned again in another contract before now; for Caterina has been a grandmother these ten years,—Ah me! how quickly they run, these years, as one trundles down the hill!—and I dare say the famous table-service, as unused as ever, has passed from the walnut-wood press of the mother to that of the daughter,—and ten years hence will probably change hands once again.

It was about eight o' clock in the evening on the Tuesday when the invited guests began to assemble at the house of the jeweller.

The aged Canon Giacomo, the Contessa Marietta, and Il Signor Conte Sebastiano de' Lunardi were the first to arrive, and were received by the father of the bride and La Signora Giuditta most courteously. The manner of the jeweller towards the bridegroom was marked by the most courtly urbanity and distinguished cordiality. Nor did this marked change in his manner towards the young man involve the slightest embarrasment of feeling or bearing, or the least consciousness of hypocrisy on the part of the

wealthy jeweller. It appeared to him quite proper and a matter of course that a penniless and unsuccessful musician should be treated in a very different manner from the possessor of thirty-five thousand scudi. And of course his relatives shared in the reflected light; though it is but fair to admit that Signor Palli had always been courteous and respectful to the aged Canon.

He had somewhat greater difficulty in receiving as welcome guests his brother and nephew. Not that he much regretted now that the projected marriage between the cousins had been broken off. For, in the first place, he was well aware that Laura was not likely to deviate from the determination she had expressed to him upon the subject; and in the next place, although the wealthy money-lender felt and expressed a very hearty contempt for penniless nobility, he was not blind to the advantage of it when allied with wealth, or to the aid which the Lunardi name and rank would contribute to the placing his daughter in such a position as he would fain have her occupy. It was not therefore that he had any grudge against his brother or nephew on this score; but simply that words had passed between them, which made it unpleasant to meet them as guests in his own house. The bluff farmer, however, if he harboured any ill feeling, was contented with such gratification of it as could be derived from ostentatiously setting forth the excellencies of his daughter-in-law, and the good fortune of his son in having at last met with such a wife. Nanni, on his part, was as cordial, and as much at his ease, and as boisterous as complete contentment and happiness could make him,

Then came Signor Simone Boccanera, with his son and daughter; the father, carefully arrayed in his Sunday suit, and much puzzled by that circumstance, could not divest himself of the impression that he was about to attend mass. The daughter was radiant with the happiness of high spirits, and as soon as she had made her formal salutation to the master of the house, ran away to seek Laura, who had not yet made her appearance. As for the Gobbo, it might have been supposed that all the management of the business in hand rested on his shoulders, to judge from his air of bustling business-like preoccupation.

The lawyers on both sides were careful to be a little after their time, in order that it might appear that their hours were fully occupied, and together with the last of them to arrive, came the notary.

Last of all, immediately after them, came the Reverend Canonico Guido Guidi, who completed the party. The handsome Canon, by far the most elegant and aristocratic-looking of the assembled group, was as bland and courteous as usual, especially so to his brother ecclesiastic Canon Giacomo, and to the father of the bride. His manner was, as usual, perfect in its easy self-possession and affable dignity. Nevertheless, a closer observer than any of those present were likely to be on that occasion, if we except perhaps Sandro Boccanera, might have perceived that the magnificent Canon was not in reality thoroughly at his ease. He had an unpleasant sense of all the important business in hand having been arranged and settled without any participation of his; and the remembrance of the latest conversations that had taken place between him and Sebastian was embarrassing to him. He could not but think it

probable that Sebastian must have become aware that he, the Canon, was acquainted with the secret of Marietta's wealth, at the time that he was urging on him to give up every hope, and hide himself from the world beneath the cassock. Nevertheless, the Canon was not a man to give up any game till it was absolutely lost. So he put the best, and that an admirably good, face upon the matter; said everything that was most appropriate and most agreeable to every one; and "looked like the time" to perfection.

When all were assembled, the bride and Caterina came in together; the former radiant with beauty and happiness, and quite unaware of any reason for suppressing the frank expression of it. As soon as she had received in due form the severally tendered compliments and felicitations of every one present, the business of the evening was begun by the notary reading the contract of marriage, which included all the arrangements that we should understand by the term "settlements." The document was of course as lengthy as approved legal science could make it, and occupied a good deal of time in the reading, although the practised performer read it in a low voice, and with such rapidity as to be utterly unintelligible, except that as often as the names of any of the parties mentioned in the instrument occurred, he pronounced them with a pausing emphasis and distinctness, as if those were the only words which needed to be clearly and intelligibly expressed to his hearers.

When at length it was concluded, the signing had to be done; and then there were more congratulations and felicitations; and then the professional

gentlemen took their departure, while the others of the party remained to supper. It was the last night of Carnival; and this was an additional reason for making merry and doing ample justice to the good things that had been provided by the care of the Signora Giuditta.

The assembled party were perfectly well inclined to see out their Carnival in proper orthodox style, and the supper was a merry one. At length it was time to think of separating. The last minutes of the expiring Carnival were running out, and the time of fasting, of repentance, and of ashes was at hand. But before the city clocks boomed out the death knell of the Carnival, it remained to employ the last moments of the time of revelry in drinking the health of the bride. Signor Palli glanced at his watch and then at the *Gobbo Boccanera*. Whereupon the latter rose to his feet and addressed the company.

"*Signore e Signori*," he began, bowing gravely to all around the board, "I have requested and obtained from Signor Giuseppe Palli, our host, and my most worthy patron, the honour of proposing on this auspicious occasion the health of the bride, La Signora Laura Palli. It may be thought perhaps that this honourable office would have more appropriately fallen to the lot of my valued friend and future brother-in-law, the Signor Nanni Palli. But under the peculiar circumstances in which he is at present situated, he perhaps felt that his mind and heart were too full of another object to permit of his doing adequate justice to the merits of another lady."

Here Nanni cried "Bravo, Sandro!" and administered a hand-squeezing to Caterina, who sate next

him, under the table, while she became crimson, and replied by a jerk of her elbow, expressive of the most intense affection.

"Not that I would pretend," continued the Gobbo, "to insinuate that I am capable of doing justice to the theme entrusted to me. Far, very far from it! I feel all that I fain would say on the subject, but it is a very different thing to be able to say it. There are cases in which the more we feel the less we can say. I have had the honour and happiness of knowing the Signora Laura for nearly two thirds of my life and the whole of hers. I leave it to you to guess then, ladies and gentlemen, how much I might say were I not restrained by the presence of the lady from speaking of her in those terms in which all speak of her in her absence. And there is the less need for any feeble eloquence of mine on such a subject, inasmuch as all here assembled have enjoyed the same opportunities with myself. There is no person here present, I think, who has not known the Signora Laura from her birth upwards. And it is a peculiar and notable circumstance on such an occasion as the present that all the party assembled have known each other for an equally long time. Among such old and well-tried friends I may be dispensed from saying more of what you all know, and may proceed at once to propose to you to drink health and happiness to the Signora Laura Palli. The wine, Signori, which the Signora Giuditta has set before us is excellent. But I am sure she will pardon me for having ventured on this occasion to prepare a little surprise for the company. I am going to propose the health of the bride elect in a certain special wine, which has chanced to come into

my possession, and which, I think you will all admit, is something quite out of the common way and worthy of the occasion. Have I your permission, Signor Giuditta, to produce my flasks?"

"With all my heart! 'gnor Sandro. There is more than one good judge of a glass of wine here, and they shall say which is best, your wine or mine. But where can yours be? I have seen no strange flasks here!"

"They are in the little cupboard in the wall outside the door, Signora, of which I have the key here. I was obliged to let the Signora Laura into my secret, and she gave me the key of the cupboard."

So saying the Gobbo left the room and in an instant returned bringing with him six sealed quarter-flasks, which he placed before his chair at the table. Then taking from the sideboard one of those large Venice glasses of the *renassiance* period, which formed its principal ornament, he proceeded to pour into it the whole of the contents of one of the small flasks.

"I have no very large supply of this rare vintage, as you see, Signori; but there will be more than enough for the purpose in hand. One, two, three, four, five, six quarter-flasks. Those are all I have got, ... as yet," he added, looking hard at the Canon of San Lorenzo. "And I did not get them all at one time," he went on. "This first came into my possession on Wednesday the 27th of last November, and the five following Wednesdays brought me the other five. It cost me a great deal of trouble and watching to get them; but, thank God! here they are. And now to begin with our most honoured guest, I first hand the goblet to the Reverend Signor

Canonico di San Lorenzo. Drink, I pray you, Signore Canonico, to the health and happiness of the Signora Laura Palli, and her auspicious union with the Conte Sebastiano de' Lunardi."

Guidi, who had been betrayed into starting slightly when the six quarter-flasks were produced, had become perfectly livid in his countenance as the Gobbo had proceeded in his speech. And when the eyes of all these present were directed to him by the concluding words, the changed and terribly menacing expression of his features was painfully evident to every one. But by the time the Gobbo had ceased speaking, and when he handed him the huge goblet, the Priest had recovered his self-possession.

"Our host must excuse me," he said, "if I decline to be the first to put my lips to a beverage so mysteriously produced, and of which so extraordinary an account has been given. The young man who offers us this wine in such a strange fashion, says that we all here have known each other for twenty years or more. I am proud to call many of you my friends of such a date. But I must confess that, whatever knowledge I have had of Alessandro Boccanera during that time,—and I am apt to know more of people who cross my path than they are often perhaps aware of,—what I have known of Alessandro Boccanera, I say, does not encourage me to place such confidence in him as an invitation so strange and so mysterious requires."

For an instant or two the assembled company looked at each other in silence and consternation, as the Canon pushed the glass from him on the table. The silence was broken by Nanni.

"Seems to me," said he, "that your Reverence is in

the right of it not to drink any more wine. I think you must have had a glass too much already. What! Sandro Boccanera a poisoner! Give me the glass. I'll be the first to drink my cousin's health in Sandro's wine."

And as he spoke Nanni stretched out his hand to the glass, and was about to raise it to his lips. But the Gobbo put his hand on his friend's arm, saying, as he did so:

"Not a drop, Signor Nanni! Let no one touch a drop of the wine which the Signor Canonico has the best of reasons for refusing. And now, *Signori miei*, since it is necessary to speak clearly, let me tell you the history of that wine of which his Reverence knows better than to drink. On Wednesday, the twenty-seventh of last November, I, being in the house of the Signor Canonico de' Lunardi, and in the closet between the chamber of the Conte Sebastiano and the front rooms, as the Signor Conte and my friend Signor Nanni will no doubt remember, looked through the window between the closet and the parlour, and then and there saw his Reverence the Canonico di San Lorenzo put a powder into the quarter-flask of wine which stood ready on the table prepared for the Signor Canonico de' Lunardi. His Reverence the Canonico Guidi then left the house, and I having, by means of the servant lad, who can testify to the fact, obtained another quarter-flask of the same wine, secretly changed the two flasks, carrying away with me that which had been poisoned by the Canon Guidi, and leaving in its place that which I had caused to be brought. I had the flask so carried away analysed by a competent chemist the same day, and ascertained that it was beyond

all doubt poisoned. By dint of unceasing watching, and many stratagems, I succeeded in similarly changing flasks, poisoned by the Canon Guidi, on five other occasions. I caused all these to be analysed, and here they are!"

The effect produced upon the little party by this statement, falling like a thunder-bolt among them, may be readily imagined. No one spoke a word, but all looked from the Gobbo to the Canon, awaiting the reply of the latter to the astounding accusation brought against him. Marietta alone covered her eyes with her hands, and moaned audibly.

"He, who would poison a man near ninety, must needs be very impatient!" said the Canon Giacomo, after a long pause.

"I do not think," said the Canon of San Lorenzo, who was now perfectly self-possessed and apparently at his ease, "that there has been any intention here of poisoning your Reverence. I will not for a moment suppose that any one here can be so ignorant as to give a moment's credence to the absurd story which that ill-advised young man has thought fit to imagine. You have all here known me, as he reminded you, for more than twenty years, and I do not think that you will be inclined now to believe on any such testimony that I, Guido Guidi, a Florentine noble, a priest, and Canon of the Chapter of San Lorenzo, am a poisoner! Go, tell such a tale in Florence, and see how it will be received. But the wine is there. He says that it has been analysed. If it has not, it can be." And here the magnificent Canon looked down on his small and insignificant-looking accuser with a severe and searching glance. "It can be analysed to-

morrow. And if it shall be found to contain poison, as it possibly may, there will be little doubt in the mind of anybody, especially of the public of Florence and the criminal tribunals, by whose hand it has been placed there. For what purpose has this misguided young man done this villany? It is not for me to form any conjecture upon such a point. It is, unhappily, a well-recognised fact, that persons physically disgraced by nature as this unfortunate young man is, are apt to nourish odious sentiments of jealousy and hatred against their more happily-formed fellow-creatures, and to be led away by a wicked desire to avenge the slight of nature against nature's better-loved children. The intention in this case has evidently been not to poison my aged friend, but to concoct a malicious and absurd accusation against me. It may be that the wine is not poisoned at all. But if it be, and if the circumstances of the case go to prove that the poison was placed in it either by the hand of the Canonico Guido Guidi, or by that of Alessandro Boccanera the deformed working jeweller . . . . I think that it is likely to go hard with the latter."

"Your Reverence speaks like a book!" said Nanni, being, much to his own surprise when he thought the matter over afterwards, the first to speak; "and no wonder! It's your trade to do so. But I tell you fairly, I for one believe that Sandro saw what he says he saw. And if there is a question whether he or another be guilty of poisoning, I'll go bail he is not the guilty man. A crooked back don't make a man a scoundrel, let your Reverence say what you will. And I'm blessed if a straight back is any surety for his being an honest one."

"Signor," returned the priest, "you are a very young man; and you speak like one. I have too much respect and regard for your worthy uncle and your father to have any wish to take note of your words. But let me tell you that the office of bail for that misguided youth's innocence in this matter, which you are so ready to take upon yourself, might turn out to be a very unpleasant, not to say a dangerous, one. But I am willing to forget your inconsiderate words and to leave you to correct your impressions by the opinions of all the rest of the present company."

Marietta here raised her head from her hands for the first time since the Gobbo had made his startling accusation. Her face was lividly pale, and her features drawn into hard lines by an expression of intense suffering.

"Not so, Guidi!" she said, in a low voice, which nevertheless fell with strange distinctness on the ear of every one present. "Not so! I cannot be guilty of the dishonesty towards Signor Boccanera of holding my peace. I cannot leave him to suppose that my opinion is such as you assume it to be, or deprive him, when accused by you, of my testimony in his favour. Bethink you what reasons *I* have for judging which is the poisoner of you two. Have you forgotten all the words with which you seared my heart and my brain?"

The priest looked at her, as she spoke, with a glance of startled surprise, which settled into an expression of the most deadly malignity as he replied:

"I forget nothing; but am at a loss to understand the meaning of your words. This matter, however,

begins to assume a more serious appearance than I had at first imagined. And I cannot fail to perceive in what has taken place indications of a conspiracy, which those who are more practised in dealing with criminal matters than I am, will not fail to trace home to the authors of it. My duty is, however, clear. I demand that those flasks of wine, sealed as they are, be consigned to the authorities of the criminal police to-morrow, that their contents may be properly analysed. Should they be found undrugged, it will be a case of calumny and defamation for which that poor fool will have to answer. Should the wine, on the other hand, prove to be really poisoned, it will be for him to account for the possession of it, and to answer for the criminal attempt on my life, in having offered it to me to drink. He may then, if he thinks fit, repeat the highly probable tale which he has told to-night. Let him abide the result of doing so! Let him see whether the present government is disposed to pass lightly over the attempt of one, not favourably known for orthodox opinions or devotion to the church, to blast the character of a man in my position by monstrous calumny, harmless indeed from its absurdity, but not the less guilty in its vile intention. Let him see whether a criminal tribunal in Florence will consider his unsupported accusation against me as a satisfactory explanation of the fact of his offering me poison to drink.

The handsome and dignified Canon looked round, as he finished speaking, upon the appalled and amazed faces of the little company with an air of superb triumph and defiance. He might in truth well do so; and those he addressed knew that he

might well do so. There were not wanting, it is true, a variety of circumstances, which, aided by the testimony that Marietta and Nanni, and the Semplicista might have given, would have gone far towards leading an acute criminal lawyer, and a jury anxious only to arrive at the truth, to a right conclusion from the facts. But in Tuscany at the period in question it was a very different matter. And every one there present knew perfectly well that if the matter as it stood were made the subject of a criminal investigation, it would beyond all question go very hard with the Gobbo. Nor would Florence have been at all a desirable place of residence afterwards for any of those who seemed inclined to endorse his story, or who had any reason to know the real truth of it. All the party, in short, knew well that the Canon of San Lorenzo, driven to bay, would be far too dangerous a quarry to be meddled with.

The prudent host was, under the influence of this feeling, the first to speak.

"Signor Canonico," he said, "your Reverence will, I am sure, believe how exceedingly painful it has been to me that this . . . . unpleasant scene should have taken place beneath my roof. It is clear . . . . quite clear to my humble comprehension, that some . . . . hem! . . . . some misunderstanding, shall I say, has taken place. Misunderstandings, we all know, will happen, and it is unwise, when such is the case . . . . clearly unwise, I say, for the parties, under such circumstances, to adhere obstinately to their own impressions. Now, if your Reverence will permit me to make a suggestion with the object of avoiding further unpleasantness to all parties, and of preventing scandal,—which, as your Reverence knows

better than I do, it is our bounden duty to prevent,—I would propose that these unlucky flasks of wine, which my partner's son has brought here as a joke—evidently a silly and very injudicious joke—should be forthwith emptied into the sink, and the entire incident forgotten."

"Signor Palli," replied the Canon, with lofty dignity, "you speak with the discretion and sagacity which I should have expected from you. But, as you must be well aware, you are asking a great deal of me. You are requesting me to make a very great concession;—a far greater concession than a vindictive man would be inclined to grant;—greater, I may add, than a man in a less unattackable position than my own could afford to grant. *I* can afford to despise any such attempts to injure me, and well knowing their impotence, may leave them to bring their own punishment on their author. And I am *not* a vindictive man. I am, moreover, sensible that if this matter were made public, a large portion of the painful results would fall on several here for whom I have a true respect and regard. I am therefore willing to consent, Signor Palli, to the request you have made to me; and I trust that my clemency and generosity in so doing will bring home to the evil heart of the fabricator of this monstrous story a just sense of the atrocity of his conduct. Let the flasks be emptied! Let the incident be forgotten! I hereby pledge you my word to take no further steps in the matter."

The assembled guests either kept their eyes fixed on the plates before them, or stole furtive glances of astonishment and inquiry at each other; while the poor Gobbo looked piteously from one to the other

in the most utter perplexity and stupor. Nobody ventured to speak a word; but Nanni got up from his seat and took a chair by Sandro's side. It was a small matter; but to the day of Nanni's death, at a ripe age, Sandro would have gone through the fire for his brother-in-law, in consequence of that little action.

"Signor Canonico, do me the favour to step with me a moment," said the jeweller, gathering the poisoned flasks in his hand; "we will together witness the destruction of these flasks, which have made already mischief enough . . . . . All the mischief probably, which they are capable of doing," he added, in an undertone, as he and the Canon left the room together, "but more than enough, ... more than enough!"

"I trust that you are aware, my dear sir," said the Canon, after the flasks had been carefully decanted into a sink, "that I have consented to overlook and forget this matter out of regard for yourself, and from that motive only. And now I will wish you good night! It is getting late, and I will not return to the party in the next room. My presence would only serve to give pain to some among them, and I have no desire to give pain. Good night!"

"The Reverend Canonico is gone," said the master of the house, returning to his guests. "He declined to return hither."

And then all present felt as if a weight and a spell had been taken off them; and everybody began to speak at once, and many hands were stretched out to grasp those of the poor Gobbo.

"You don't believe, then, that I am a calumniator

and a liar, and a poison dealer!" he said, in a faltering voice, and with tears in his eyes.

"Believe it!" cried Nanni; "save me from ever drinking with his Reverence Canon Guidi!"

"*I know* that Sandro Boccanera has spoken the truth," said Marietta, sadly and solemnly. "I know that he has preserved my uncle's life; and it shall be my care to let each one of you, who care to learn the truth, know all that our family owes to his kindness, his uprightness, his courage, and his ability."

Sandro could not speak in reply to these words, but he rushed up to Marietta's side, and kneeling on one knee, kissed her hand.

"To think that such a man should play such a *basso* as he did!" cried old Canon Giacomo.

"Do *you* believe me to have spoken the truth, Signore?" said the Gobbo, addressing himself to the jeweller.

"My dear Signor Sandro, I believe that it is sometimes a very dangerous thing to speak the truth. I believe his Reverence the Canon of San Lozenzo most implicitly when he says that if this ugly matter went before the tribunals it would go very hard with you, whether you had spoken the truth or not. I believe that you would have been far wiser, having removed the poisoned wine successfully, to say nothing to anybody; and that we shall all be far wiser to say as little more about the matter as possible."

"But we have not drank Laura's health all this time!" cried Nanni.

"I think Sandro's health ought to come first," said Laura; "I feel inclined to pledge it in a bumper myself."

"So do I. *Brava figlia mia!*" cried the old Canon.

And so the Gobbo's health was drunk with all the honours; and then that of the bride elect; and then, Lent-tide having already commenced for the last half hour or more, the party separated.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

THERE remains little to be told of our story;—nothing indeed of the facts of the history which these volumes were intended to relate;—that of the recovery of the Palazzo Lunardi—as I have chosen to call it—to its ancient possessors by the self-devotion and life-long struggle of a lady of the family. Her work is done, her success complete.

At the end of Lent the two marriages were concluded prosperously and happily in all respects. Nanni and Caterina of course went off to their home in the Casentino; but they spent a week or so every Carnival with their friends in Palazzo Lunardi. The Gobbo continued in his old home with his father as long as he lived, which was not above two or three years; and after his death he accepted a room in the third floor of the Palazzo, and has lived ever since as a member of the family, *maestro di casa*, I believe he calls himself; and amply earns his salt, I take it, by managing Sebastiano's affairs for him, while he is living in a world of crotchets and quavers.

Il Conte Sebastiano and his wife of course took up their residence in the Palace, and have increased and multiplied till there is no present danger that

the name of Lunardi should fail in the land. The unlucky opera, it may be mentioned, was performed with entire success the following Carnival. No *prima donna* fell ill when the wealthy amateur Conte's opera was to be performed; and as the unfortunate words *Spento è Arbace* had, as a concession to the popular feeling, been changed to "Arbace è spento," no burlesque rhyme was suggested to anybody, and the work was found to abound in merit.

When old Simone Boccanera died, Signor Giuseppe Palli, being deprived of the assistance of his partner, *did* at length what he had been so long declaring he would do. He finally retired from business, and went to live at his villa of "Schifanoia." But this *retiring* is not a step which all men can venture on with safety. And "Schifanoia" became to the retired man of business a more complete "refuge from care" than he had calculated. For, before the first year of his absolutely unoccupied leisure was over, he too followed his junior partner.

Of course the venerable Canon Giacomo could have but a few more years to live. He outlived the jeweller however, and outlived his ninetieth year. As long as he lived Marietta continued of course to live with him; and they remained in the old apartment on the third floor. No entreaties of Sebastian and Laura could induce the old man to leave the apartment in which he had so long, and, as he said, so happily lived. He could not give up the sunny *loggia* with its outlook over the Vallombrosan hills, and as for climbing the stairs, if he were to miss that exercise on his daily return from mass, he should never have an appetite for his dinner.

And when the old man at length was gathered

to his fathers in the Lunardi chapel, Marietta still persisted in inhabiting the same little apartment! That had been the scene of all the hopes, the fears, the struggle, and the interest of her life, she said, and she wished nothing else, than that the same familiar home should be the haven of her rest. Not that she did not take an active and eager interest in every part of the old mansion, constantly visiting each portion of it, and watching over its conservation with an affection that seemed to attach itself to every stone of the fabric. She succeeded in very soon causing the removal of the offending glass doors at the bottom of the great staircase, and I suspect that, if she had been left entirely to her own devices, she would have torn from their hooks in the walls the fine new windows with their large panes which the abominated Perini man had substituted for the old ill-fitting and little-light-giving casements. But this Sebastian could not be got to consent to. To her also fell the congenial task of continuing the entries in the book of family records, in which the last event mentioned had been her father's death. The pleasure with which she inscribed on the pages the next entry, recording the re-purchase of the palace, may be easily imagined, and it was with scarcely less satisfaction that she added to the record in due time the birth of of an heir to Palazzo Lunardi and the renovated fortunes of the house. But the occupation that was perhaps most dear to her of all was the restoring and beautifying of the Lunardi chapel in the church of San Giacomo. Many hours of her life were spent there, and there she now rests beneath a handsome monument to the memory of "MARIETTA COMITISSA DE LUNARDIS," with a somewhat lengthy lapidary

Latin record of the embellishments executed by her in the chapel;—a modest rendering of the "*Si monumentum quæris, circumspice*," to which in truth Marietta was well entitled, even if the glance around comprised the neighbouring palace.

As for the Reverend Guido Guidi, his work on "Reserved Cases" received the distinguished approbation of the highest authorities at Rome. He was made, as has been already stated, Bishop of Hippopotamos *in partibus;* became, as he had specially ambitioned to become, Confessor to the most exalted personage in Tuscany, and was in time promoted to an important bishopric with cure of souls, and eventually received that crown of ecclesiastical earthly glory—A RED HAT. During the whole of the long career marked out into stages by these successive promotions and successes, the Canon, Confessor, Bishop, Cardinal, pursued the dignified tenor of his prosperous way, approved, admired, respected, envied, honoured. And when he died, men put a fine marble with a magniloquent inscription over his grave, and hung a red hat by a long cord from the lofty vault above it.

This was his reward; a due and fairly earned one. Do not let us grudge it to him; or fancy that our moral sense, or poetical or other justice is outraged by the record of such a proper and normal series of circumstances. Industry and intelligence will produce wealth. Temperance will produce health. Decorum and fair seeming will produce honour, and station, and respect. The race *is* to the swift on the special race-course on which each race is run. But if you enter for the "Wealth" sweepstakes, you must not expect the "Health" cup for your running in that

race, however swift. If you go in for nobility of nature and high moral worth, you must not expect to receive your prize in cash.

The Canon Guidi did run well in the race for which he entered himself; and won its prizes accordingly.

Nothing could be more imposing, richer, more decorous, fairer-seeming, grander, than the splendid scarlet mantle which draped the majestic figure of his Eminence as he stepped in state before the eyes of the admiring crowd. But as to what passed in the heart that beat beneath the mantle, and the thoughts that were busy under the scarlet hat, and as to the question whether you or I, reader, would accept the grand mantle and the hat, with all the good things that go with them, on the condition of accepting with them his Eminence's heart, and his Eminence's head, with the feelings and thinkings of or belonging to those Right Reverend organs, why that is another matter.

THE END.

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